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California John, THE PACIFIC THOROUGHbred.

A Romance of Needle Bar.

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AUTHOR OF "OVERLAND KIT," "THE FRESH OF
FRISCO," "JOE PHENIX," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERIOUS ASSASSINATION.

What is this demon that haunts the moonlight?
—OLD PLAY.

He was a "tender-foot," and had about all the cargo on board he could conveniently carry when from the saloon he essayed to make his way to the hotel. The moon shining brightly, it was almost as light as by day, but even a bright moon is of little use to a man well primed with the potent liquor of Needle Bar, on the Colorado, in marvelous Arizona.

Trace the course of the Rio Colorado from its mouth, at the Gulf of California, northward to its source, where the Rio San Juan and the Green river uniting form it, and at the point where the old trail from Prescott to Fort Mohave touches the stream there is a peculiar rock formation which from ancient days has been known as the Needles. At this point the iron band which is to connect the glorious Pacific coast with the old civilization of the East also crosses the river—this road extending from Albuquerque in the east to an obscure hamlet a few miles from the old town of Los Angeles in the west.

The road, as we write, is being constructed with the utmost vigor, and under shelter of the Needles quite a little town has grown up. Needle Bar it is called, probably out of the wish to appear odd, for there isn't any bar in the river nor anything else to suggest the title.

The head-quarters of the road being fixed for the time being at "The Bar," and a large camp of graders, track-layers and other railroad hands being only a mile off, the little settlement grew amazingly.

The tender-foot, as the "pilgrim" new to the frontier is known, was a tall, well-dressed man, thirty-five or forty years old. Any one read in the characters to be met with just on the borders of civilization would have had no hesitancy in setting the stranger down as a "sporting man," or gambler.

He had arrived at the town that evening, coming in by the California stage, accompanied by a young lady whose beautiful face and form would have attracted attention anywhere, even in the crowded streets of a great Eastern city. No wonder, then, that her *entrée* into such a town as Needle Bar should have excited commotion.

Only one little glimpse of her, though, did the loungers around the hotel get, for, entering the house—the Grand Central Hotel, as the little shanty-like boarding-house was named—she retired almost immediately to her apartment. Not so her escort. After registering his name as Jason Wentworth, and the lady as Miss J. Romero, he lounged around the bar-room.

In Arizona the "effete trammels of a played-



"THE HORSE GAVE A CONVULSIVE LEAP AS THE WELL-AIMED BULLET STRUCK IT, AND THEN CAME DOWN IN A HEAP, STONE DEAD."

out civilization" do not prevail, and therefore, to the credit of the men of Needle Bar be it recorded, the stranger was asked to drink ten times within the first half-hour of his arrival.

Seven of the ten drinks may be set down to the lady's credit, for good-looking women were few and far between in Needle Bar. There were eight or ten of the sex among the two hundred and odd souls that made up the population of the town, but they were, nearly all of them, of the rougher sort—those who had seen wild life in its roughest phases and were "at home" in such a camp—acting as bar-tenders, waitresses, etc., etc.—not so thoroughly vicious or depraved as they were eager for excitement, but were none the less a source of incessant trouble among the men who frequented the gambling resorts.

And when the men of the town compared this gentle, apparently innocent, and really beautiful young lady with these female furies it almost seemed to their fancy as if an angel straight from heaven had lighted down in The Bar. It was a puzzle to these anxious souls how she came to be in company with such a character as the stranger. His wife she was evidently not, nor his sister, either, for she bore a different name; what then was the tie which connected the swaggering sharp with such a pearl?

He was a speculator—that was his "platform every time," and he had come to Needle Bar to look for a good opening to make a strike, and here he winked significantly at his auditors. He was all business from the word go, but if there was any sharp in town who prided himself upon flipping cards, he reckoned that, for fun, he would try and find out what kind of meat he was made of.

Though rather inclined to be loud in talk, there was a certain something about the man—a look in his cold gray-green eyes, a peculiar contraction of his mouth, which to the observant indicated that he could and would make his boasts good with deeds if needed.

There were some "few men in the town who played keards once in a while," the landlord, burly Mickey Lynch, modestly admitted, and he further added that he had no doubt some of the "boys" would accommodate Mr. Wentworth with a game if he was hankering to pass away the time. After supper was over Mr. Lynch volunteered to show the stranger round and introduce him to the noted men of the town; the women in the dance-hall the landlord didn't mention, but they took them in as a matter of course.

All the sports were on tip-toe to see the new-comer tackle some of the best card-players of the camp, for his vaunt had traveled quickly, and more than one sport was anxious to test the stranger's metal. In two or three places room had been made for him at the table, and the presiding genius had politely intimated that if the gentleman wanted to try his luck he was "agreeable."

But with a good-natured grin he had declined the invitations. "Too much fire-water on board to-night for business, gentlemen. I'm in for fun to-night; just seeing the sights and enjoying myself, and I'm an awful bashful man, too; wait until I kinder get used to you a bit; then I'll take a whack at the animal."

Fairer couldn't be said, and the crowd voted him "a brick of the first water."

But the evil star of the stranger was in the ascendant that night, for the landlord was obliged to leave him to return to the hotel alone. He was in good hands, though, enjoying the hospitalities of the best-known individual in the town, the Keno King, Keno Bill, who kept the saloon, "The Home of Alcibiades."

It was but a short walk from Bill's place to the hotel, and it was only a little after eleven o'clock, quite early for Needle Bar, when Jason Wentworth left the saloon and started for the hotel. He was one of those rare cases who could not possibly become drunk all over, no matter how much liquor he imbibed. His walk was unsteady; his legs were completely under the influence of the strong drink which he had taken; but his head was as clear and calm as though he had not imbibed anything stronger than water.

"A nice little town; I reckon I will make the rifle here," he muttered, as he passed through the shadow cast by a shanty. At that moment there was a peculiar sound in the air—a whirr, as though a bird was on the wing, and then out into the moonlight, clutching, tearing at his throat in apparently fearful agony, stumbled the man. Down he went on his knees, only to fall backward as though pushed to earth by some invisible hand.

A gurgling sound escaped from his throat, and then he lay still.

A form stole from around the corner of the shanty, bent over the fallen man for a moment, then glided rapidly back and disappeared behind the old building, while in the silent night the great round moon stared down upon the white face of a death-stricken man.

No rifle would the sharp from afar make in the camp of Needle Bar.

CHAPTER II.

THE HOME OF ALCIBIADES.

In the mining region, down in the great South-west and on the line of semi-civilization that belts the frontier, the hotels and saloons are noted for their odd names. The odder the name the more popular the place, seems to be the theory of the proprietors of these houses of refreshment for both man and beast, and on the frontier many of the men are much more like beasts than humans.

Needle Bar was not behind its sister settlements in this respect, for three "first-class" refreshment places were there in the place, namely: the "Grand Central Hotel," which aspired to receive and entertain all travelers; "The Home of Alcibiades," kept by the Keno King, William Alcibiades, as he was pleased to term himself (but which name was received with derision and scorn by his fellow-citizens, to whom he was only Keno Bill, or the Keno King. In Bill's resort was a well-stocked bar, but all the rest of the room was devoted to the fascinating game of keno, which, west of the Mississippi, flourishes like a green bay tree. Keno is nothing in the world but the old German game of lotto, so dear to childhood's days. It is played with cards, buttons and a revolving urn in which dice numbered from one to two or three hundred, according to the number of players engaged in the game, are placed. The cards are divided into squares, irregularly numbered, and many of them blank. Each player buys a card, paying so much for it; that money (less ten per cent., which goes to the dealer for his trouble), is the "pool," or "pot." The dealer draws a number from the urn and calls it out aloud. Each player who has that number on his card immediately puts a button on it; the player who first covers one row of numbers straight across his card wins the game. The moment this is done, the fortunate man immediately cries out, "Keno!" while the remainder of the players generally ejaculate, "Oh, blazes!" Then the cards are bought over again and the game proceeds. Where the allurements of the game comes in is the certainty that some one of the players must win the pot, less the ten per cent., and as the pool, when the cards are selling at a dollar apiece, and there are twenty to forty playing, is pretty large, each player by investing a dollar stands a chance to win from eighteen to thirty-six in return. Where the profit to the bank comes is the unvarying ten per cent. allowance, and it is sure to follow that if ten men with ten dollars each sit down to play keno, and the bank takes ten per cent out of each game, it doesn't matter who wins; in the end the bank will have the whole hundred dollars.

The keno saloon did the best business in the town, for the game was "run on the square." There is cheating even at such a simple game as keno by collusion between the dealer, the marker-down of the numbers called, and a confederate player or players. Many a hardy pioneer "down to his uppers," as the phrase goes, had reason to bless the minute when he invested his last dollar on a keno card, and by a lucky chance happening to strike a pot of twenty or thirty dollars was thereby enabled to go on his way rejoicing.

The third and last public resort—not including the miserable little dens that nestled like unclean things on the outskirts of the town—was "The Silver Hell." This place disputed with The Home of Alcibiades for the patronage of The Bar.

It was drinking-saloon, dance-house and gaming-house combined. The proprietor was known as Charley Yampas, a peculiar personage about whom there was a deal of mystery. He was a man, apparently, for he wore a man's garb, and was tall and strong, yet he had the face of a woman. In complexion it was as red as the copper-colored skin of any "buck;" an ugly-looking scar extended across the right cheek from the corner of the mouth to the eye, indicating that a fearful wound had once been inflicted there, and this scar gave a decidedly savage expression to the face. The proprietor of The Silver Hell was a very quiet, reserved sort of person, rarely saying much, and when speaking always talking with a strong foreign accent. All that was known of him was that the name he bore was Charley, and he claimed to be an Indian of the Yampas tribe. But this was utterly ridiculous, the wise men of the town declared, for no such head as he bore ever sat on a red-skin's shoulders. He might be a half breed, but no full-blooded red buck.

For a man suspected of being a woman in disguise to run such a place as The Silver Hell was really marvelous, for all such resorts attract, as their natural patrons, the most desperate and lawless men of the region wherein they are located, but the "Big Chief," as the proprietor of the place was usually called, had in at least twenty cases proved that if he possessed the face and some of the attributes of a woman, he had the strength of a giant, the courage of a lion and the skill of a soldier trained from boyhood to the use of every weapon. No man, no matter how desperate, how reckless of life, or how maddened with liquor, ever cared to brave the anger of the Big Chief a second time. The

first lesson was always sufficient. Man or woman, the owner of the dance-house could hold his own with any pilgrim who ever set foot in Needle Bar.

And now that the reader is acquainted with the three popular resorts which are destined to appear prominently in our story, we will proceed to describe a scene which took place in Keno William's place just about the same time that the vaunting stranger was meeting his fate at the hands of the silent and mysterious assassin in the one street of Needle Bar, the cold moon the only other witness to the death-struggles of the assailed man.

The keno-room was well filled; the boss himself was presiding at the wheel of fortune—"shaking 'em up" in obedience to the oft-repeated cry from some impatient and unlucky gambler, who fancied that if the urn was made to revolve violently upon its axis, thus more thoroughly mixing up the numbers inside, the luck might change.

A new-comer in the town had made his appearance in the room that night; no one there had ever seen him before, and how he had got into The Bar was a mystery. He had not arrived by the Californian coach, nor by the hack line from the East, both of which arrived daily and at about the same time, and there was always a crowd of loungers around the Grand Central to gaze at the passengers. The stranger, too, was a first-class passenger; no common man, prospecting miner or adventuring tramp who would be apt to "hoof it" into town. On the contrary he was a sharp of the first degree, dressed entirely in black, and wearing a "billed" shirt. No broadcloth suit, though, but one of black corduroy, almost as strong as leather and well fitted for rough work. After the Southern and Californian fashion, he wore no vest, and the bosom of his shirt was ruffled in the most extraordinary manner. Around his waist a belt was girt, and the keen-sighted ones who "took stock" of the unknown saw that the belt supported two revolvers of the size known as "navy"—the best tools for desperate work—and an eight-inch bowie-knife.

The man had walked quietly into the saloon and no one had noticed him until he was inside; he had helped himself to a chair, sat down, and tilting the chair back so that he could rest against the wall quietly surveyed the players intent upon the game.

"Keno!" had resounded through the room as a lucky soul put his button on the last number, and then brought his big fist with a whack upon the table to give due emphasis to the peal of victory; the chorus of curses from the rest of the players who had been "left" followed as a matter of course, and then, while preparations were going on for a new game, some one had discovered the presence of the stranger.

Never had Needle Bar been honored by the visit of such an individual. He was a representative of the old-time sporting man, now almost extinct upon the Pacific coast. His dress of black, his ruffled shirt, in the bosom of which sparkled a little tiny diamond stud; the smoothly-shaven face, a mustache and slight imperial alone adorning it—all to the knowing eye proclaimed his trade as accurately as though he carried it emblazoned on his breast.

But, this stranger did not seem anxious to join in the game; he sat quietly in his chair and contented himself with being merely "a looker-on in Vienna."

Alcibiades had noticed the man and upon first glance had taken a dislike to him; something about the stranger excited his anger, although it would have troubled him to have told what it was. Perhaps it was the cool, resolute-looking face of the man, or, maybe, the slightly sarcastic expression that certainly rested upon the face.

Now the Keno King, like a lion upon its native heath, brooked no rival near his domain, and, somehow, the unpleasant thought took possession of him that the unknown visitor might make trouble.

Again the yell, "Keno!" was heard, and this time it was a big mule-skinner from Hualapai who had "made the rifle!" The pot was a big one, too—over fifty dollars—and in the joy of his heart, the winner declared that every man in the room must take a drink with him.

"Come and hev a 'bowl!' he yelled, "every doggoned man in the shanty, and the cuss wot refuses is a sucker and a boss-thief, and for two cents I'll bust him wuss than a mule would a-fittin' a base drum!"

All filled up to the bar but the stranger. The mule-skinner had his eye on the quiet man in black, whose bearing contrasted with his own disreputable appearance, which aggravated him.

"Will you drink, pilgrim?" he roared. "No, thank you; much obliged all the same," was the reply.

"See hyer, man"—and out came a big revolver—"you hev either got to drink or 's salted."

CHAPTER III.

SHOWING FIGHT.

"NEITHER the one nor the other," replied the stranger, who, without a movement of his chair,

raised his right arm and, behold! a cocked revolver gleamed in the hand, leveled at the breast of the big skinner.

"Don't make a movement, my greasy friend," the man in black warned, "or I shall be obliged to tunnel through you; then the track-men can follow and put down the iron and before you know what has happened there'll be an engine and a train of cars running right through you, and if that don't astonish your insides I don't know what will."

The big bully glared in speechless rage, but the other went on:

"Now, I do not want a fuss with you; I am the quietest of men; so just put up your pop-gun, agree to let the matter drop right hyer and I give you my word I won't bear the least bit of malice."

Now, this was about the coolest thing the listeners had ever heard, but for a wonder it struck the coarse mule-skinner as being extremely funny.

"Waal, durn me ef you ain't a hull team an' no mistake!" he exclaimed, thrusting his revolver back into its holster and marching with outstretched paw up to the unknown. "Put it thar, stranger; it's all right; you needn't drink unless you want to hist yer p'ison; but I say, stranger, durn me ef I won't feel too mean to look a mule in the face ef you don't tickle your throat with a leetle bug-juice, jest to oblige the crowd and help the house along."

This was Alcibiades's cue to speak. It galled him that a stranger in "store clothes" and "biled" shirt should carry matters with so high a hand.

"This hyer house don't want the trade of any man who ain't gentleman enough to take his licker when he is invited to drink in a polite manner!" he exclaimed, scowling at the strange visitor. "For any such man as that the outside of this house is a good deal better than the inside."

"And, who may you be, pray?" asked the other, surveying the master of the keno shop with a look of quiet, yet insolent defiance.

"My name is William Alcibiades, and I am the boss of this ranch."

"Well, I thought so. I heard of you before I struck the town. You are a sort of a king-pin hyer—a 'head devil,' if I may be allowed the use of the expression. You not only run this shebang, but also aspire to rule the whole town. Yes, I've heard that you were a dangerous kind of boss. Say! why didn't you introduce yourself to me before you inveigled me into this discussion, so that I would have known who you were, and then I would have had sense enough not to run counter to your views. Alcibiades? Where on earth did you get that name? Keno Bill is all right; that suits you to a T; but the idea of making love to the name of the old Greek to stick up over the door of a keno room and a liquor shanty to boot! Why, I wonder the ancient bones don't rise out of their dust and haunt you by night, and most certainly they would if the spirit of the warrior and statesman wandering in the other world possesses in the least degree the pluck and valor that the Athenian displayed while he lived."

The keno man had listened with a great deal of impatience to this long harangue, of which he understood but little. He hadn't the remotest idea of who or what the man had been whose name he had adopted. He had come across it in the columns of a newspaper and the oddness of it tickled his fancy, and as he was in want of a name, just then, on account of a little difficulty which he had had with a very unpleasant sheriff of one of the coast counties south of the Golden Gate, without more ado he had helped himself to the appellation. And that this cool and insolent stranger knew of the real Alcibiades while the king didn't, was another reason why he should feel incensed against him.

"You are using a good deal of jaw, young feller!" Bill fiercely exclaimed; "and since you are so free with your tongue, suppose you tell us who you are. I reckon thar ain't any on us what has been introduced to you."

"My name, sir, is John."

"John what? John ain't enough for a white man's name, though it may do for a Chinaman."

"Well, really, you have so obfuscated me with these proceedings that I will be hanged if I hav'n't forgotten whether I have got any other name or not," answered the other, pleasantly, and with a perfectly serious look upon his face.

"Where are you from?"

"California."

"From California, hey? You didn't come in the coach?"

"Hang your old coach! I have a chariot of my own—Shank's mare!"

There was a broad grin upon the faces of all the listeners; the stranger was "panning out" well.

"What do you want here, anyway?"

"To make a living."

"How? You don't look much like a working-man," Keno Bill sneered.

"Oh, I use the same tools you do; I travel on my cheek."

The crowd tittered, and the questioner became still more incensed.

"See hyer! you're too fresh!"

"Too fresh! too fresh!" the other muttered to himself, as if pondering over the term. "Strange how that accusation meets me at every turn. Go where I will the cry arises, 'you are too fresh!' Can there be any truth in it? Does any gentleman present know of any big salt spring in the neighborhood where I could put myself in soak for a while so as to see if I couldn't remove some of this freshness?"

"Look hyer, Mr. Jack!" cried Keno Bill, roughly.

"John! not Jack; I told you distinctly John—J-o-h-n," and the speaker spelt the name out on his fingers.

"Well, Jack or John: what difference does it make?"

"To your humble servant much, for I have a strange reluctance to being called out of my name."

"Well, then, Mister John of California—"

"Now you've got it!" the other interrupted; "that fits exactly! That agrees with the climate; you can smell the balsamic odor of the nodding pines, hear the whirr of the northern eagle and the flap of the tail of the jackass rabbit bounding over the sage brush! California John! That's my handle, and don't you forget it!"

"Don't you worry about your name; life is mighty unsartin in this region; the climate is dreadful unhealthy sometimes, and men drop off without ever being sick."

"Die with their boots on, eh?"

"Well, it comes so sudden that they never know if anybody else does," Alcibiades replied, with grim insolence. "But this is what I want to remark, and I trust my meaning is plain—the man in this hyer country of Arizona who is asked to waltz up to the bar with the crowd to take a drink with the boys and refuses is no gentleman."

"I doubt that statement, and therefore either you are a liar or I am one," replied California John, promptly.

At this bold declaration of war of course all looked for trouble, as Keno Bill was an ugly customer when he was insulted.

But the master of the saloon in his sudden dislike of the stranger and his anxiety to pick a quarrel with him had forgotten that the cocked revolver was still in the hand of the other, and that long before he could get a weapon out the stranger could send him where keno and kindred games flourished not.

For a moment Keno Bill was nonplused; he had got himself into this difficulty without any trouble, but for the life of him he did not know how to get out.

The stranger in the most unmistakable manner had challenged him to a personal encounter, for on the frontier when the lie is given and received blood must be shed to avenge the insult; either with fists or weapons the outrage must be atoned.

But it was of no use to "pull" on the stranger; there was not twenty feet of space between the two, and the impression came to Bill that his antagonist was no tyro with the pistol.

"Do you dare to come outside and have a fair fight with me, whar we won't hurt nobody but ourselves?" he challenged.

"I dare!" cried California John, promptly.

CHAPTER IV.

A STRANGE DISCOVERY.

THIS suited the crowd exactly. Keno was all very well, but what was it to the excitement of a game where two human lives were at stake?

"We will do this thing up in first-class Eastern style," the Keno King remarked. "We have had two or three little disturbances since the settlement of this hyer town, but no regular square thing yet. I move that we adjourn outdoors, measure off the ground and fix things as they ought to be."

"Gentle Alcibiades, thy words are as full of wisdom as the words of the ancient Greek whose great name you bear," responded the Californian. "So go ahead, sir; I'm your gold mine from the surface croppings to the bed-rock."

He was careful to keep his cocked revolver ready for action until he was fairly out into the street.

The crowd had filed out as soberly and as orderly as a church congregation. But there was a sudden interruption to the programme when they had all got into the street.

Not two hundred feet away, face upward, with the bright light of the cold, calm moon shining down full upon it, lay the body of the man who had come to his death in such an untimely manner.

Lying plainly in sight it naturally attracted attention; but at first they had concluded that it was some bum, overcome with drink. Hence, great was the astonishment of the crowd when it was discovered that it was the body of Mr. Wentworth, who had arrived in company with the beautiful young girl that very day.

"Well, durn me ef I thought he was as drunk as this!" remarked the first man of the crowd,

as he bent over the prostrate man. Then the pallor of the face attracted his attention, and his cry of alarm speedily brought the rest to his side.

"Hyer, boys, quick!" he cried. "Durned ef I don't believe thar is something wrong here," and his hand feeling moist he lifted it to see that it was red with blood.

"Murder!" cried another, in a hushed, awe-struck voice, appalled by the unexpected discovery.

"What's the matter, boys, anyway?" Keno Bill asked as he came up.

"Murder! That is what's the matter!" replied the man, kneeling by the side of the body.

"Why, if it ain't the sport who was going to skin us at keards," the keno man remarked.

"Durned ef I ain't sorry for him. He went all round town to-night, talking pretty loudly, too, or he did in my place, and I s'pose some scoundrel thought that he had a big stake on him."

"His watch ain't teched," said the kneeling man, holding it up as he spoke, and then examining his pockets, produced a wallet which appeared to be tolerably well filled. "Whoever did it didn't go through him, anyway."

"Thar's a leetle diamond ring on his finger, too," observed another sharp-eyed citizen.

"Stand back, fellow-citizens, and give me a chance to look into this hyer matter!" Keno Bill exclaimed. "Thar has been foul play hyer, whether the man was robbed or not. He has been killed and no mistake about it!"

The throng of people fell back and allowed Keno Bill to advance. He knelt by the side of the body and proceeded to make a careful examination.

At the first glance there was very little indication of violence, but upon a close inspection, a little scarlet ring encircling the neck was discovered, and Bill at once announced the fact to the crowd.

"See hyer, boys. Durned ef it don't look as if the man had been choked to death!"

"Thar's blood on his clothes somewhar's," declared the man who first discovered the condition of the prostrate form. "I know it, 'cos I got some on my hand."

The miner held up his hand, and upon the fingers, plain to the sight of all, was the stain of blood.

"We must go slow; one thing at a time," observed the Keno King, who did not relish the interruption. "Furst and foremost, hyer is the mark on the throat, jest for all the world as if the fellow had been choked to death, and the face, too, is all distorted jest as if the life had been squeezed out of him."

Then the self-constituted investigator turned his attention to the body. He unbuttoned and threw open the high-cut vest, and there on the white surface of the shirt was a gory stain.

"He has been cut or plugged, sure enough!" Bill announced.

No doubt in regard to this, but, what puzzled the bystanders was the fact that there was no visible sign that the shirt had been pierced by blade or ball.

Alcibiades stared and shook his head, and so did all the rest. This was a mystery such as Needle Bar had never known. The blood-spot was right over the heart and the crimson life-tide was still welling forth.

"This beats my time, gentl'men; if it don't, you may call me a catfish!" the Keno King declared.

"Suppose you open the shirt and then the nature of the wound can be discovered," California John suggested.

Alcibiades gave a contemptuous sniff at this, but acted upon the hint, nevertheless.

With his sharp-pointed, keen-edged bowie-knife Bill slit the shirt down the center, and throwing it open exposed the muscular chest of the dead man.

Right over the heart was a little red spot, the tiniest kind of a wound, from which the blood was slowly flowing. The wound was no bigger than would have been the mark left by the stab of a knitting-needle.

Carefully, with his handkerchief, Bill wiped away the blood so that the wound could be plainly seen by all, and not one of the eager crowd bending over the body, mouth agape with curiosity, examined the odd-looking hurt with more attention than California John.

"Well, durn me! if this don't beat any thing that I ever see'd or heered tell on!" Alcibiades averred.

"See hyer, gentlemen, I think I can throw some light on this affair," California John remarked.

The eyes of all were instantly turned upon him, and on more than one face appeared a look of suspicion.

"I mean how the man came to his death, not who killed him," the Californian continued. "As I walked into the town to-night—I came by the California trail—I saw something glisten by the roadside, and being of a curious nature I picked up this little article, which I took to be a toy, but which I now perceive has been put to practical use." Then the speaker took from his pocket, and held up to view, a tiny little dagger, a toy such as the Spanish maids use to

fasten their luxuriant tresses. The handle was gold, and the blade, just about the size of a sailor's needle, was polished steel, about six inches long. It was quite clear to all, the moment they beheld this little weapon, that the stricken man had come to his death by means of just such an instrument.

In an instant Keno Bill was on his feet.

"Boys, *thar* stands the murderer!" he cried.

CHAPTER V.

THE POPULAR VERDICT.

Now, California John, cool as he always was, for a moment was a surprised man—the more so because by a glance at the faces around he saw that the master of the keno-shop was not the only one in the crowd who believed the accusation.

"Seize him, boys," Bill continued. "That leetle knife is the tool with which the murder was committed, and the man that has it is the chap that struck the blow!"

The crowd, though, were not quick to obey this command, for upon the first sign of danger the sharp had pulled out his revolvers and was ready for what might follow.

"Hands off, gentlemen!" he cried, warningly. "I am as innocent in this affair as any one of you, and the accusation is all a lie on the part of this big brute."

"A lie, is it?" Keno Bill retorted. "All the same you are the man that did the deed. You have the weapon, and if you didn't strike the blow how comes it that you have the knife?"

"Didn't I tell you that I picked it up?"

"Too thin!" sneered Bill.

"And if I was the man who did the deed, would I be fool enough to show the weapon in the open manner I did and so bring suspicion down upon myself?"

"Oh, you cunning rascals play too sharp, sometimes," Bill answered, "and you fetched out the knife so as to make us believe that somebody else did the job."

"Men, I appeal to you! Do you put any faith in this ridiculous idea?" California John demanded.

And, thus called upon to define their position, the members of the little throng looked in each other's faces and then stared at the accused.

The stranger sharp, a keen reader of the human face, saw at once that the majority of the crowd *did* suspect there was truth in the accusation.

"Put it to vote," suggested Bill; "that is the way to come at the truth of the matter. And, stranger, I want you to do me justice right hyer and now. I ain't a-bringing this charge ag'in' you so as to git out of the leetle difficulty we have got into. You are a stranger in these parts, and mebbe you might think so, but it ain't the truth. Keno Bill don't crawfish to any man on earth until he is laid out on the flat of his back on the top of it. The min'te you fetched out that leetle knife the idee struck me that you had something to do with this hyer awful job, and I shall believe that you have until it is proved that you haven't."

And California John, looking straight into the eyes of the other, saw that he was honest in what he said.

"All right! you will find me the easiest man in the world to get along with provided no man attempts to jump my claim and I am treated half-way decent. If this hyer community thinks I had any hand in this cowardly murder, why, I am willing to stay right here and be tried. All I ask is a fair show and no favor to either side."

"That is squar", and that is all I want. I'll own right up to you, stranger, I don't like you overmuch," remarked Bill, frankly. "You are too durned fresh and sarey, and when a cock like you comes crowing around my ranch I al-lers tries to cut his comb and take the crow out of him if it is possible, and it generally is," he added with a grim smile. "I think you had a hand in this muss, and if you didn't knife the man yourself, you know who did it, and I reckon you ought to be tried. But let's have a show of hands on that p'int. All you that think this hyer man ought to be tried, hold up your right hands."

Slowly by ones and twos every right hand in the party went up. If there were any in the throng who thought the stranger was innocent of any knowledge of the deed, they thought also that a trial would not do him any harm.

"Unanimously elected," the sharp remarked, as he saw that every man in the crowd was in favor of a trial. "Well, gentlemen, I'm not the critter to back down on my word. Will you give me a good squar' trial?"

"Yes!" cried Keno Bill, "a squar' deal, every time!"

"Oh, yes," chimed in the crowd, "the clear white article and no mistake."

"That satisfies me, gentlemen; hyer are my pop-guns and my toad-sticker; take good care of them, please, for they have done me good service in many a tight pinch," and the stranger, letting down the hammers of his revolvers, drew his knife from his belt and held them out toward the crowd.

All the members of the throng looked at Keno

Bill as though they thought he was the proper person to take the tools of war, but he shook his head.

"No, gentl'men, I kinder stand in the light of this man's accuser and it don't look exactly right for me to take his plunder. Capt'n Joe, s'pose you take them?"

Captain Joe Kersands, a brawny six-footer of middle age, yet with snow-white hair and beard, was one of the first settlers of the town. He kept a general store next to Bill's place, where almost anything could be purchased—as the inhabitant, proud of the prosperity of Needle Bar, was wont to boast, anything from a needle to an anchor.

"All right if it is agreeable to the company," the captain said, advancing, and the Californian delivered his weapons into the hands of the old store-keeper.

"Take good care of them for I shall want them back soon, for I am not much afraid about pulling out of this little scrape," John assured, as he gave up his trusty tools.

"Upon my soul I hope you will, pard," the old store-keeper observed. He was impressed by the manner of the other.

"Well, what is to be the order of these proceedings, anyway?" John demanded.

Keno Bill shook his head.

"I 'pass,' pardner; that sort of thing is clean out of my line. Capt'n Joe, you are posted. How shall the machine be run?"

In truth the white-bearded giant was a veteran in frontier matters; for forty years at least he had been in the front ranks of the pioneers of civilization, and had acted well his part in many a rude court hastily convened to administer frontier justice.

"Since this gentl'man surrenders and is willing to stand trial the thing is simple enough," the old captain replied. "The first thing is to provide a place of confinement for the accused; then remove the body of the murdered man to where it will be safe from harm, so that the jury can look at it; on to-morrow call out the hull town, lay the matter afore the citizens and let them fix up a court, judge and jury to try the case."

"But in the mean time there must be somebody to take charge of the prisoner. Not that I think you want to get away, pard," Bill added, "for, from what I have seen of you, I reckon you have grit enough to stand up to the rack and take your fodder every time."

"You bet!" ejaculated John.

"But, there is a right and a wrong way of doing things and we don't want to go wrong when we can just as well go right."

The men around assented to this, and the big mule-driver from Hualpais, who had first called attention to the presence of the stranger in the keno room, now seized upon the opportunity to speak.

"You want a sheriff, that is what you want! I know the hull lay-out, jest as well as if I was running the game. You want a sheriff, and I know the cuss who kin fill the bill; jest the man you want; true-blue every time and fit for any man in this hyer region to tie to, red or white, black or yaller! I nominate Jake Hairpin for sheriff! Who says ary thing ag'in' it?"

No one did; on the contrary the odd-sounding name seemed to tickle the fancy of the crowd, and one of them immediately seconded the motion.

"I'll vote for Jake Hairpin!" the citizen cried. "It 'pears to me that I have heerd tell on him or hav' met him somewhar's afore."

"Sartin, you have!" replied the mule-skinner. "Mighty few men on top of this yere airth w'ot ain't either met or heern tell on Jake. Oh, I tell yer! he's a hustler from the word go!"

"Hairpin will do all right for sheriff," Alcibiades remarked. "But, where is he and how soon can he be here?"

"How soon kin he be hyer?" repeated the driver; "why, he is right hyer now. Hyer he is; I'm the man, Jake Hairpin, and you kin bet yer pile on it, too!"

This disclosure rather amused the crowd. It was rather a novel idea for a man to nominate himself, but in the wild West the odder the idea the better it is liked, apparently.

After all there was nothing to be said against the man. He undoubtedly would make as good a sheriff as anybody. So the matter was settled. Keno Bill suggested that the little room back of his saloon would make as good a jail for the prisoner as could be found in the town, and the prisoner and the sheriff proceeded thither.

"Remember, we hold you responsible for the prisoner," Bill continued. "And, if you don't produce him in the morning Judge Lynch will have to try his hand on you, maybe."

And thus, instead of a duel there was to be a trial for murder.

CHAPTER VI.

THE VAILED LADY.

ABOUT a quarter of a mile above the town of Needle Bar, close to the bank of the river, was a small shanty, the inmates of which were a source of wonder to the dwellers in the camp.

Within the lonely cabin dwelt a man and woman, the one a strong contrast to the other, for the man was short in stature, deformed in

frame, possessing the head and body of a giant placed on legs short enough for a dwarf. Dame Nature, too, had set an "envious mountain" on his back, and Hiko, the Hunchback, as he was usually termed, was an object of general aversion.

He had only made his appearance in the neighborhood within the last two months, coming no one knew from whence, and living no one knew how. With his own hands he had constructed the little hut on the river's bank, and lived there all alone until a chance passer-by one day made the discovery that there was a woman within the rude habitation; she was tall and stately in figure, dressed entirely in black and had her face covered with a heavy veil so that it was impossible to see her features.

The simple miner, in his astonishment, had stopped short and looked with all his eyes at the unexpected sight, and the woman, perceiving that she was observed, had come forward and closed the door, thus cutting off the view.

The miner, being on his way to the town, continued on his course, and when he arrived at the camp took particular pains to spread abroad the wonderful news that there was a woman—a real live woman—in the shanty of the Hunchback.

When Hiko had first made his appearance in the town, some of the rough fellows were rather inclined to make game of him, thinking that a hunchback was only a sort of a cripple and that no danger was to be apprehended from such a being. But, as we have said, despite his deformity, Hiko had the limbs of a giant, and by the time he had nearly killed two or three of the boys, who had essayed to make a plaything of him, the town woke to the conviction that, despite his infirmity, there were very few men in the camp who had any business to fool with the Hunchback.

We have said that no one knew how he got his living; that statement we must qualify a little, for, since his arrival in Needle Bar, he had taken up a business which had been neglected before he came, and one which no man in the town envied him the possession of; he became the public grave-digger.

On the average there was about one death a week in the camp; not always by violence, although stabbing and shooting affrays were, alas! far too common, but it was a hard climate; all had to rough it; and many a tender youth who had left the crowded East intent upon finding a fortune in the golden West, succeeded only in winning a nameless grave amid the rocks of the mountains or in the sands of the desert-like prairie.

And to the rude, pushing men who people the remote camps on the frontier, the burial of the dead, even when they are friends and acquaintances, is a thankless task.

It happened shortly after Hiko's arrival in camp that a stranger took sick and died. He had no acquaintances, and the "plunder" he left behind him was not worth a ten-dollar note. A discussion arose as to what disposition should be made of the body. "Toss it into the river," said one heartless wretch. "Put it out on the perarie and let the wolves finish it," another, even more heartless than the first, suggested.

"Hang it, no!" cried Keno Bill; "let's start a graveyard with him, and I will chip in five dollars to defray the expenses. But who will bury him?"

"I will," answered Hiko, stepping forward; and so it was that he came to take up this peculiar business. He attended to the burial and then passed his hat around for a collection, and few men were there in the camp who refused to "chip in" something, even if it was only a two-bit piece, unless they were completely "strapped," when the Hunchback passed around the hat.

But the mysterious woman, who always kept her face concealed, and who dwelt in the solitary hut of the Hunchback, for a short time powerfully excited the curiosity of the Needle Barites, but Hiko explained the mystery in the most prosaic manner.

"It is my sister," he said; "she has had the small-pox very bad, and her face is so dreadfully scarred that she doesn't like to have any one see it."

This stilled talk speedily, and not only that, but it caused all passers-by to give the shanty a wide berth, and even in a measure to steer clear of the Hunchback himself, for all had considerable fear of the horrid disease.

Let us now convey the reader to Hiko's lone cabin.

It was near the midnight hour; the interior of the shanty was illuminated by a candle placed upon the rude table, and by the table, her veil off and her face uncovered, sat the mysterious woman who had so excited the curiosity of the people of the town, but great would have been their wonder if they could have seen her now. The Hunchback's story was a trick to allay discussion. The face of the woman was as fair as the face of a child, and wonderfully impressive, too, although strongly masculine, and betraying in every feature that she possessed an indomitable will.

Footsteps were heard without rapidly ap-

proaching. She listened for a moment, recognized the steps, and hastening to the door, admitted the Hunchback.

She saw by the expression upon his face the moment he entered that he had come laden with momentous news.

"Well, what is it?" she asked, seating herself by the table again.

"He has come at last," he replied, helping himself to a stool.

"I felt sure that he would come—if not to this camp, to some other along this new line. He would not dare to stay in California, for his fears would tell him that, sooner or later, I would be sure to find him, but down in this new country, where a new camp springs up each new day, he would be apt to fancy that he could find concealment and safety."

"He is here, and yet he is not here."

"What do you mean?"

"He is here, and yet safe from your vengeance."

"No, not safe from my vengeance until the earth hides him!" the woman cried, fiercely.

"He is not under the earth, yet, although safe from your vengeance, or any one else's, for that matter."

The woman gazed at the Hunchback earnestly for a moment.

"I guess what you have to say; Martin Kenyon is dead."

"Yes, stabbed to the heart in the street of the camp, a couple of hours ago."

"By whom? What foe tracked him down and robbed me of my vengeance?"

"If you do not know, I do not know who does," the Hunchback replied, meaningly.

"How should I know?" responded the woman, a look of astonishment in her eyes.

"Because the man was killed with a bodkin-like dagger, exactly like the one with the golden handle which you use as an ornament in your hair."

With the quickness of thought, the woman carried her hand to her head to pluck forth the little golden-hilted dagger which she usually wore thrust through the great mass of blue-black hair crowning her superb head.

A cry of alarm came from her lips; the ornament was not there!

"You see it is gone; you have lost it!"

"Yes," and the woman seemed dazed by the fact.

"Why did you fling it away after you had done the deed?"

"Are you mad to think such a thing?" she cried, impatiently.

"The man was killed with the weapon—stabbed right to the heart, and—"

"Do you think I could encounter Martin Kenyon and overcome him with such a feeble weapon as my hair-dagger?"

Hiko looked at her thoughtfully for a moment.

"No," he said, after quite a pause; "he was in liquor; you surprised him in some way, and then slew him."

"Have it your own way!" she cried. "What did he call himself here?"

The Hunchback's face seemed to say, "Why ask what you already know?" but he answered, all the same.

"He went by the name of Jason Wentworth, and was as full of boasts as ever. A young girl came with him."

"A young girl—did you see her?"

"No, her name, or rather the name he gave at the hotel, was Miss J. Romero."

"Romero? Romero? I do not know any one by that name. What do you think, Hiko, will she be apt to interfere with our purpose?"

"I cannot tell that, of course, until I discover how much she knows of Kenyon's plans."

"We must give our attention to that at once."

"There has been a man accused of the murder of Kenyon, or Wentworth, as the people here know him."

"Yes?"

"He was foolish enough to produce the dagger with which the deed was evidently done, and which he said he had found."

"That accounts for it; when I was in the town, this evening, it must have fallen out of my hair, and he found it. Who is the man?"

"A bold, reckless fellow, careless alike of either life or death. I have heard of him before, although I never met him. He calls himself California John, here, but on the Pacific coast I am pretty certain that he was known as Jackson Blake, the Fresh of Frisco. The man answers the description which I have heard given of the Fresh, to the letter, and if it is not the man himself, he is near enough like him to be his double."

"Hiko, this man must be saved!" the woman exclaimed, decidedly. "We need just such a man; we will have use for him."

"As to saving him, that is all right; I am agreeable; but, to use him is another thing, for from what I have seen of him I fancy it will not be so easy a job as you imagine."

"Let me alone to find a way to break him to my will; we need such a man to oppose to Alcibiades; for Keno Bill must be pulled down."

Rare crotchets this strange pair, as the reader will see anon.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TRIAL.

Few men who have had experience in legal matters have not chafed and fretted at the law's delays, but in Judge Lynch's court the speed of the trial is only equaled by the quickness of the execution of the sentence.

So it was in this case. The stranger who had signalized his *entrée* into the town by picking a quarrel with the best man in it, was "put through" with astonishing rapidity.

It was close on midnight when he had been accused of the murder of the swaggering sport, and at six o'clock on the following morning the court assembled to try the case.

"There wasn't a-going to be any hanging on by the gills, in this matter," more than one citizen observed. The stranger was going to get justice, short and sharp if not sweet.

It was the first time Judge Lynch had made his appearance in Needle Bar. True, there had been a few affrays in which pistols and knives had played prominent parts, and there had been bloodshed followed by death, but the inhabitants, like sensible men, held that if two men, with a grudge against each other, choose to fight it out, it wasn't any one's business as long as the thing was conducted on the square. If one of the parties was killed, he was quietly buried and no fuss made about it. More civilized communities reach the same result, "in self-defense," but only after a long trial and a great waste both of time and money.

There had been a few cases of robbery and murder, but in all of them the wrong-doer had contrived to cover up his track so well as not even to leave a peg behind on which to hang suspicion, and it was useless to rouse up Judge Lynch to follow on a "blind" trail.

But on this occasion it really looked as if they had got hold of the man, "red-handed," as it were.

Keno Bill had taken it upon himself to play a prominent part in the proceedings; circumstances, too, rather forced him forward. From the time he first set eyes upon California John a premonition came to him that the stranger was fated to make him trouble; and, in his sharp way, he had seized upon the first opportunity to bring matters to a focus. With his good right hand he had intended to sweep the gentleman from the Pacific slope from his path.

But, Fate seemed inclined to take a hand in the game, and instead of being a principal in bringing down the man he feared, he was to be but an instrument.

The organization of Judge Lynch's court was the first thing in order, and this, after considerable discussion, was accomplished. Captain Joe Kersands was nominated for Judge Lynch, and elected without a dissenting vote; but the old frontiersman was not willing to accept the office without a jury to pass upon the case.

"I don't believe in any one man responsibility," he declared. "It is contrary to the spirit of our free American institutions."

So a jury of twelve men were chosen, and Keno Bill, being the accuser, volunteered to act as the prosecuting attorney.

The court was convened in the open street, since there was no building in the town large enough to accommodate the crowd, and the sheriff was notified to produce the prisoner, which he immediately did.

Little responsibility attached itself to the sheriff in this case, for the Californian, perfectly conscious of his innocence, did not think he would have the least difficulty in proving it, and so rather courted the trial than shrunk from it.

No time was wasted; the moment the prisoner was produced the trial commenced.

The appearance of the court was commonplace enough, but arranged so that every one could get a good view of the proceedings. A wagon had been provided for the accommodation of the judge and jury, and although the thirteen men in it were rather crowded, yet it answered the purpose very well. Another wagon held the prisoner and the sheriff, and still another one Keno Bill and the witnesses who were to testify in regard to the matter.

The old captain opened the court with a brief speech. He spoke of the violent taking off of the stranger, and how important it was that such a bloody deed should not go unpunished, and wound up by assuring the prisoner that as far as he, the judge, was concerned, he should have the fairest and the squarest kind of a trial.

"That is all I ask, judge," John spoke up, never able to keep quiet, for the life of him.

"You shall have it, sir, you can bet your bottom dollar on it!" the old captain reassured. "But you ought to have a lawyer to defend you," he added.

"No, thank you," was the Fresh's answer. "I reckon I am lawyer enough to look out for myself, and if I can't I will have to stand the consequences, that's all."

"It's your game, sir; play it any way you please."

Then the real business of the day commenced. Keno Bill was "no slouch of a lawyer," as more than one of the spectators remarked. In fact, Alcibiades had had so much

experience in courts that he was, for an outsider, very well posted in regard to the law, and he managed to make out a pretty strong case against the prisoner.

The first witness was the man who had discovered the body; and a couple more of the citizens, who had closely followed the first, testified to about the same thing. Then came the doctor of the town, Silas Rice—Doc Si, as he was commonly called—the biggest scamp that ever escaped from a white jail, but a really excellent medical man, for all that, when he was not so drunk as to be utterly incapable of motion, which was his normal condition. In fact it was only in the morning, as a rule, that the doctor was in a state to attend to business, and from supper-time to nine at night. The Doc commenced drinking in the morning right after breakfast, by high noon he was chock-full, and all the afternoon was occupied in sleeping it off in some retired corner. Then he "came up smiling" for supper, and after the evening meal was dispatched, immediately proceeded to "load up," so that by nine or ten o'clock he was in that peculiarly blissful state when a man is not supposed to be capable of seeing a hole through a forty-foot ladder.

But, as it was early in the morning, the doctor was sober, and as he had made a careful examination of the body, he was able to give a very clear account of how the man had come to his death.

In the clearest manner he swore that the stranger had been killed by just such a weapon as the Californian had produced.

John did not neglect to cross-examine the witnesses in a sharp and shrewd way. The defense upon which he relied was an *alibi*. If he could succeed in showing that he was somewhere else at the time that the stranger was stricken in the street, why, it would be evidence positive that he could not be the assassin.

By the evidence of the witnesses he proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that the stranger had left Keno Bill's saloon about eleven o'clock, and tried to show that at that time he was in the saloon, which he did not leave until he went into the street to settle the quarrel in which he had become entangled with Alcibiades, and therefore it was clearly impossible that he could have been the slayer of the stranger.

There was one weak point in this defense and that was, California John had come so quietly into The Home of Alcibiades that not a single soul within the saloon had noticed his entry. The first time his presence had been noticed by any one within the room was when the big mule-driver from Hualpaís, Jake Hairpin, had centered public attention upon him by insisting upon his drinking.

Quick to put two and two together, uncultivated as they were, these rough men did not fail to observe that the prisoner had not been able to prove conclusively that he was in the saloon before the stranger quitted it. And Keno Bill tried his best to impress upon the minds of the jury that there was plenty of time for the Californian to attack and kill the stranger; then slip into the saloon so as to be ready to prove an *alibi*.

The strongest point against the prisoner was that he had produced the weapon with which the man had evidently been slain, or at any rate, one exactly like it.

The tide was setting strongly against the Thoroughbred, and bets were freely offered, two to one, that he would be convicted.

CHAPTER VIII.

QUEER JUSTICE.

THE last witness brought forward was the young lady who had accompanied the stranger into the town, Miss Jennie Romero, as the dead man had registered her upon the hotel book.

Universal interest was excited when the beautiful young girl appeared upon the scene. She was a perfect picture, with her pale, statuesque beauty, her hair and eyes black as night, and her features as finely cut as a Grecian model. She told the simple story of her life, or as much of it as she knew, for it was plain from her statement that there was a great deal of mystery about her younger days.

From early childhood she had been educated at one of the convents on the Pacific slope, and all she knew in regard to her relatives was that she had an uncle living who paid her bills, and who would one day come and take her away when she was old enough. In time that uncle came, Jason Wentworth, the man who had come to his death in such a fearful manner. Just one year had elapsed since she had quitted the convent, and that time had been spent in traveling from place to place. Her uncle said that he was a speculator, and that, she presumed, accounted for his roaming habits. In answer to a question from the judge as to whether she had ever seen the prisoner before, she replied that she had not, and was quite sure that if he had ever had any business transaction with her uncle during the past year she would have known something of it.

The girl was as cold and impassive as a statue, and did not betray the least emotion; but, one thing all agreed upon, and that was, no handsomer maid had ever breathed Arizonian air.

Her evidence did not hurt the prisoner any, neither did it help him. Bill had suggested the girl's testimony because he thought it probable the dead man and the living sport had had relations before either of them came into Needle Bar, and by the girl's evidence he would be able to prove it. Like a skillful lawyer he sought to find a motive for the deed.

All the witnesses having been examined, the judge signified that if the accused had any remarks to offer, now was the time to "spit 'em out."

The Fresh of Frisco now faced the jury, who held his fate in their hands, ready to plead for his life, for he saw that he was indeed in a desperate situation. As he ran his eyes over the faces of the twelve stern, bearded men, from the expression upon their features he concluded that there was not much chance for him, but he made an able speech, though, for all that, brief as it was. The only evidence to connect him at all with the murder was the fact that he had picked up a weapon similar to the one by which the murdered man must have come to his death—not the very weapon itself, for, as he solemnly declared, he had that in his pocket in the saloon at the very time when the blow had probably been struck, and he wound up the speech by asking what reason he had for killing the man, an utter stranger to him—a man, in fact, whom he had never seen until his eyes had rested upon the body lying so still in the moonlight; not plunder, for the valuables upon the body had not been touched, and then, if he had done the deed, would he have been fool enough to show the weapon with which the murder had been committed?

It was a plausible argument, yet seemed to make no impression upon the jury. The strong point against the prisoner, and one that no amount of argument would remove, was the presence of the odd little dagger in his pocket.

It was now Keno Bill's turn, and he "went for" the Californian "red-hot."

"How do we know that these hyer two men, the dead one that can't speak and the live one who can, didn't meet afore they ever struck this hyer town? How do we know that thar wasn't an old grudge atween the two and it was settled hyer by the one man tackling the other from behind, and then, arter he was keeled over, putting the knife into him? Of course he didn't go through the man; it wasn't plunder that he was after, but satisfaction. Ain't it as plain as the nose on a man's face that thar was plenty of time for this leetle job to have been done and for the man who did it to sneak into the keno saloon afore the trouble took place about the drinks? That is what I want to know! And as to the man fetching out the tool that did the job from his pocket, that was done to throw people off the trail. That is jest whar, in my opinion, he was too cunning for his own good, but to put it all right down into a nutshell, the man was killed with a leetle knife. That man"—and here he pointed his long, bony forefinger directly at the prisoner—"has got the knife; thar ain't another one like it in The Bar, and if thar is, let it be trotted out and prove me a liar! He's got the tool, and if he didn't do the job, who did? I say that he is guilty, and I call upon you, fellow-citizens, to put him through as an example to the rest of the world that no red-handed murderer can find any place in this hyer town!"

Then there was a whir in the air, and a small paper parcel fell into the wagon right at the judge's feet.

No one had the slightest idea of the direction from which it had come; no eyes had witnessed the throwing of the parcel; it had seemed to drop right down from the skies.

The judge stooped and picked it up; it was a small package, carefully wrapped in heavy brown paper. Upon it was an inscription, which the captain read aloud.

"Evidence for the prisoner; open it, judge."

Expectation was on tip-toe as the old man removed the wrappings and held up to view another peculiar little dagger, exactly like the first. Wrapped around the handle was a folded paper which the judge opened and read aloud. It ran as follows:

"You have got hold of the wrong man. This is the blade that did the deed. Look upon the steel and see where the spots of blood still stain it. It was no murder, but the hand of justice striking down its legally sentenced victim. Release the accused and look elsewhere for the hand that did the act."

Great was the astonishment of the hearers as they listened to this unexpected information.

The judge passed the note to the jury, and they examined it carefully, and then whispered to each other; the letter produced an entirely different effect from what the writer of it anticipated. Instead of diverting suspicion from the Fresh, it only fixed it still more strongly upon him!

"Don't you see, thar's a gang of 'em," exclaimed one of the jury, in a whisper to his neighbors. "I heered tell on sich things afore. This camp is beginning to amount to something, and thar is a gang goin' to come down onto us. We have got hold of this feller, and the rest are trying to get him off."

And so the whisper went round among the twelve who held the life of the prisoner in their hands, and each and all nodded their heads gravely. The time had come for the regular contest between the rascals of the town and the peaceable and honest citizens, which nearly always forms part of the history of all new towns, and these representatives of the good men of Needle Bar braced themselves to meet the ordeal.

The same idea that occurred to the jurymen came also to Keno Bill: it was a cunning trick on the part of the sharp's confederates to save him.

Instantly he moved that the jury should deliver their verdict. The judge charged the jury, and his speech bore hard upon the prisoner.

The jury put their heads together and consulted for a few moments, then the foreman rose, a huge, brawny miner, with a tawny beard like a lion, and a reputation which was none of the best.

"What say you?" said Judge Lynch.

"We find the prisoner guilty of murder in the first degree."

A slight scream escaped from the lips of Miss Romero.

"Oh, no, he is innocent!" she cried.

CHAPTER IX.

A SQUARE GAME.

CALIFORNIA JOHN sat in his prison-pen, the little room in the back part of the keno saloon building, meditating upon his peculiar position. Death seemed about as near to him as it had ever come, although this time it came robed in the guise of the law, but it was none the less dreadful—none the less certain for all that. After all his bold and carefully planned efforts to escape, the end seemed near at hand.

Four-and-twenty hours more of life only had he, according to the decision of the twelve who had passed upon his fate. He had been convicted of murder in the first degree and sentenced to death—to be hanged by a rope like a dog, but, in their wisdom, the jury had recommended the judge to grant the prisoner a respite of twenty-four hours, instead of having the sentence executed immediately, as is usually the custom of Judge Lynch's court.

As the foreman of the jury remarked, in his blunt, matter-of-fact way:

"Yer honor, thar ain't much doubt in the minds of this hyer jury that this man did the trick, but as the proof ain't jest as clear as it might be, we think that it is only fair to give the man another chance for his money. Some other cuss might have done the job, although we don't think that is likely, seeing this man had the tool right on him, and as for the other one w'at was chucked into this hyer wagon, it r'ally looks as if there was a gang mixed up in this hyer thing, and if it is so, the quicker we kin bu'st it up the better for this hyer town. But, as I sed, we all want to give the man a good squar' show, and so we all think that instead of stringing him up right away, you might give him a day or two, so that he might be able to find the feller w'at did the job, if it wasn't him."

The Fresh asked if they were going to set him at liberty, or allow him to search under careful guard for the true culprit, but the judge and jury emphatically dissented from this implied proposition. It would not be wise to allow him the slightest chance to escape, so the judge answered that such a thing could not be. The prisoner must remain in close confinement, while his friends could prosecute the search.

"Friends!" cried California John, with bitter accent. "Why, I am a total stranger in this hyer town. I don't know a soul in the burg. The only acquaintances I have made have been at the muzzle of a cocked revolver, and it isn't at all likely that men whose toes I have trod on, and whom I have challenged to a duel on sight, are likely to step forward now to fight my battle."

"Waal, I would, for one!" roared the mule-skinner. "The more I fight with a man the better I like him. I will do anything I kin for you in reason, and don't you forget it!"

The judge shook his head. "It's no use talking, prisoner. You are one of the kind of men whom we don't dar' to let go at large. Any man that has got the grit to walk into The Home of Alcibiades, and bluff the boss to his teeth, and smart enough to get the 'drop' on him right in his own ranch, is too 'tarnel smart for us to take chances on. No, sir; we'll have to lock you up, but I'll give you my word, as an honest white man, that I will do all I kin for you."

"Well, judge, you might just as well hang me first as last, and not keep me in suspense," John remarked. "If you were to give me a chance to work on this thing myself, perhaps I might be able to strike a trail."

"We are afeard you will strike a trail that will lead you clear out of this town, and outen our hands, too," the judge retorted.

California John was removed to the selected prison, a strong guard was placed around it, and then the crowd broke up.

Old Captain Joe—although acting as Judge

Lynch—was a good square man, and he did his best to keep his word to the prisoner.

In the first place he set out to discover who it was that had thrown the parcel which had fallen so unexpectedly in the wagon, but, not the least thing could he find out about the matter.

As near as any one could guess the package had been thrown from the roof of one of the neighboring buildings, but, which one was a puzzle; and as the shanties—they were nothing more—were built after the fashion common to the Western frontier, one-story high, with a plain flat roof sloping to the rear, and a false front of boards running up like a second story where the sign was generally painted, any expert climber could mount to this roof, and, concealed behind the false front could easily have thrown the parcel into the wagon.

But, as the mass of the people of the town of Needle Bar were satisfied that California John was the true culprit, it was little wonder that there was no zeal for further search.

But John was wrong when he declared that he stood alone and friendless. Such men make friends everywhere, and after his commitment to his place of confinement he held a regular levee.

Keno Bill had taken upon himself the task of guarding the important prisoner. Jake Hairpin, who had been informed that he would be held personally responsible for the safe-keeping of the doomed man, remained in the room with him constantly; then there were two men placed on guard outside the door in the rear of the building, and two more at the door which led into the keno saloon, so that if the prisoner had attempted to overpower the sheriff, his cries would instantly have brought assistance.

After the court had adjourned and the sheriff and the prisoner had taken up their quarters in the little room, an hour or so was passed in conversation, "swapping lies," as Hairpin would have described it, and then, as time commenced to hang heavily on their hands, the genial mule-skinner suggested a leetle game of poker to help the lagging minutes pass more swiftly.

The Fresh, nothing loth, warned the sheriff that he was a "chief" when poker was concerned, but Hairpin was not to be bluffed; he "allowed that he was a big Injun, too, on that lay."

An hour's experience convinced the son of Hualpais, though, that his "medicine" was not strong enough to buck against the luck which attended his opponent. Before that hour Jake had never been willing to allow that the man existed who could deal more dextrously from the bottom of the pack, or slip more cards up his sleeve or down into his boots than he; but now, in his heart of hearts, he owned that he had met his master. For instance, growing desperate, and it being his deal, he determined at one bold stroke to retrieve his heavy losses, so he skillfully snaked an ace from the pack, got it down safe in his boot, and then, ringing in a "cold deal" on his smiling antagonist, gave him three aces, a ten-spot and a tray, while at the same time he dealt himself four kings and an eight of diamonds. He reasoned that the Fresh, believing that he had an invincible hand, would play it for all it was worth, and that he, with his four kings, would scoop in the wealth.

And the Californian did bet as if he believed his hand could not be beaten.

Finally the mule-skinner, planking up the last of his ducats, cried out:

"I'll call you, jest fer greens, though from the way you are betting I should reckon you had an invincible hand."

"Right you are, my friend; nothing beats four aces at straight poker," the Fresh replied, and to the utter dismay of the sheriff his opponent laid down four aces on the table!

Hairpin glared as if he had seen a ghost. There, sure enough, on the table, was the ace of spades which he had supposed was hidden away in his boot-leg.

"Darned if there hain't been cheatin' 'round this board!" he cried, unable to contain himself.

"How in blazes did you git four aces?"

"Well, you dealt me three, and I caught another in the draw," was the smiling reply.

"Pardner, I don't want to say that you don't play a fair, squar' game, but hyer is an ace w'at dropped to the floor when I was a-dealing the papers," and Hairpin fished the card out of his boot and laid it on the table.

"Dear me! how curious! Why, there must have been five aces in the pack," the Fresh observed, at the same time raking in the spoils.

The sheriff heaved a sigh but spoke not. It was no use to contend with such a man.

Just at that time Doc Si made his appearance.

CHAPTER X.

A STRANGE OFFER.

"WA-AL, wot in thunder do you want?" Hairpin growled. He was not in a good humor.

It was evident that the Doc had been drinking freely, although not enough to render him incapable of knowing what he was about.

"I want a few minutes' private conversation with this gentleman," the medical sharp re-

plied, with an assumption of great dignity. It was a peculiarity of the doctor that the moment he got in liquor he became very dignified. In person he was a little, short fellow, with a fat, unmeaning face, terribly bloated from the effects of drink.

"And who sed you could, hey?" the sheriff demanded. "Blamed if I know whether I ought to let you or not."

"I've seen the judge, you long-legged, no-horned specimen of a Texan steer, and he says that there isn't any objection!" the doctor retorted. "This gentleman hasn't got any too many hours before him and I come to see him in regard to his private affairs. He probably wants to set his house in order before he takes the long leap into the other world."

The Fresh looked sharply at the doctor. He didn't know what to make of this visit.

"Wa-al, wot do you say?" asked Hairpin, turning to the prisoner. "Do you want to swap some lies with this little fat cuss?"

"I shall be pleased to hear what the gentleman has to say, of course."

"Drive on yer mule-team then; I can't go outen the room, 'cos that is ag'in' orders, but I will sit over hyer, and if yer don't gabole too loud, I reckon that I won't try to pick up wot you say."

The sheriff sat down by the door, while the doctor helped himself to a chair which he drew up close to where the Californian was seated.

"Have a drink?" said the doctor, producing a flask, and thus opening the conversation.

The prisoner declined, but the invitation was not lost on the jailer, who instantly signified his willingness to "b'ist in a leetle p'ison."

"Take care, it may be drugged!" the doctor warned.

Hairpin drew back his big paw which he had outstretched toward the flask in some little alarm.

"Drugged liquor, you know, which will upset your apple-cart, and then I can help the prisoner to escape."

The jailer shook his head and laughed his great hoarse laugh.

"No, sir-eel! You can't fool this child with any such idee as that; you might lay me out, but how are you gwine to get past the guards at the door? Oh, no, too thin! and I'll sample the lick and risk it anyway."

And, sample it he did to an extent that enraged the Doc.

"I'll bring a demijohn next time I come," he muttered.

"Do, or a demijack, either; I kin git away with anything that has got lick into it, big or little," Hairpin remarked, complacently.

Then the sheriff sat down again, and the doctor, drawing his chair as closely as possible to the one occupied by the prisoner, began a confidential conversation.

"You are in a tight place here," he said.

"Yes, but I have been in a tighter one."

"And you will be in a tighter one to-morrow when they take you down to the bank of the Colorado and swing you up."

"Is that the programme?"

"You bet it is!"

"Many a slip between the cup and the lip, you know."

"Perhaps life is worth something to you?"

"Well, I reckon it is worth something to every man, isn't it?"

"Yes, but to some more than others. If you saw a chance of escape you would embrace it?"

"Most decidedly."

"I take a great interest in your case."

"You are very kind."

"Yes, I am going to attend to the hanging."

The Fresh drew back and surveyed the other for a moment at this intelligence.

"Oh, you are the hangman?"

"Exactly; I am the only medical man in the town, so the boys requested me as a particular favor to boss the job. It is a leetle out of my line, you know, but I couldn't make them understand it. A doctor's mission is to preserve life, not to destroy it, but our citizens are a leetle thick-headed."

"Some doctors kill more than they cure," replied the Californian, with grim humor.

"Very true; mistakes will happen in all vocations. But I say, do you see any way to escape this threatened doom?"

"No, I do not at present," the prisoner answered, frankly; not a single means of escape could he discover.

"What is your life worth to you, anyway?"

The prisoner looked puzzled at the question.

"I see you don't comprehend what I mean."

"Indeed I do not."

"I mean, if you had a chance to buy your way out of this scrape, what would you give?"

"A man would give almost anything that he has for life."

"Ah, that is the point that I am coming to," and the doctor brought his lips still closer to the ear of the Californian; "what have you got that you would be willing to give?"

"How much wealth?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't exactly know," the Fresh replied, thoughtfully. "But see here, pardner,

it seems to me that you are anxious to see my hand without being willing to show your own."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say; you come and ask what I would be willing to give to get out of this scrape, but you haven't explained to me how that is to be accomplished."

"I will attend to that, of course."

"Yes, I presumed you would, but at the same time I want to know something about it; I want to have a clear understanding in regard to the plans; the idea that you have may not be good for anything."

"Oh, but it is!" cried the doctor, quickly. "There is not the slightest doubt about its succeeding."

"Well, I can tell better about that when I know what it is, so go ahead and spin it out."

The doctor shook his head and looked wise.

"Oh, no, I cannot, I really cannot; I cannot tell you my plan until I am satisfied that it is going to pay me to work it, for the risk is great, you know. The men who have doomed you to death are no children to be played with."

"I should say not; not the kind of playthings I should select at all."

"They would be apt to make mince-meat out of me if I cheated them of their vengeance."

"Very likely."

"The plan is certain to succeed; it is no new idea; it has been tried before, but only the well-read medical man would be apt to know anything about it, and the joke of the thing is that these men, who are hungry for your life, will be cheated of their vengeance without knowing it."

The sharp looked at the doctor, a strong expression of unbelief upon his countenance. In fact, the Californian believed that the other was so "fuddled" he did not know what he was saying.

But, the doctor was rather amused than otherwise at the doubt of the prisoner, for he smiled as he said:

"Oh, it is all right; don't you be afraid; I can fix it every time, provided I can see it is to my advantage to work the miracle. Now, then, to come right down to business; how much can you give?"

"Well, how much do you want?"

"All that you have got," was the frank answer.

"You might take all I have, and it wouldn't break your back to carry it away."

"I s'pose you are pretty well heeled? You sporting gentlemen generally are," the doctor persisted.

"Sometimes we are, and sometimes we ain't; it depends a good deal on luck, but, there is one valuable that I always carry a pretty good store of round with me."

"Aha! what is that? Diamonds, I presume."

"No, you are wrong; it is cheek—an article of more value to a man than diamonds, sometimes."

"No use to me, though," retorted the doctor.

"I s'pose you could rake up two or three thousand dollars, either in coin or dust?"

"Oh, yes; give you the collateral for it."

"Collateral? What collateral?"

"My note at ninety days; good as wheat."

The doctor looked disgusted.

"No joking for Heaven's sake! This is not a joking matter."

"You are right there, sure as you're born."

"Notes are of no use to me. How much gold—I s'pose a thousand dollars at the least?"

"I s'pose nearer a hundred than a thousand."

"Five hundred?"

"Under one, including thirty odd dollars that I just h'isted out of that big galoot yonder, in a leetle game of poker. Five hundred! Why, man, what are you talking about? Do you think I am a walking United States mint?"

"Oh, if you haven't got but a hundred dollars it is of no use; I can't afford to run the risk for that. Haven't you friends of whom you could borrow some money?"

"Nary man in the town to chip in for me, that I know of—nary pard, man or woman!"

"Well, so-long!" observed the doctor, in a tone of intense disgust, rising to depart. "I will do the best I can for you, and see that you are swung off as easily as possible, but a hempen cravat is always a tight fit."

CHAPTER XI.

A BOLD ATTEMPT.

"A CONSOLING sort of a fat cuss he is, ain't he? and chock-full of bug-juice, too," Hairpin remarked, as the door closed behind the doctor. "Durn me! if he come and talked to me 'bout a hempen cravat and a-swinging me off easy, if I was fixed like you with a rope 'round my neck, cuss my cats! if I wouldn't hit him one under the ear that would smack him right through the side of the house!"

The prisoner did not reply. He was too busy cogitating whether there was anything in the doctor's plan or not, but, finally, he came to the conclusion that it was more idle talk than anything else.

Then another man put his head in at the door and asked if he could have a few minutes' conversation with the prisoner.

This was Charley Yampas, the proprietor of

the popular resort known as the Silver Hell, one of the roughest places in the camp, as the reader will probably remember. He was the well-built, copper-colored fellow with the terrible scar on the face, and who had such an effeminate look about his features.

"Look-a-hyer! this ain't a ball, nor a fandango, neither is it a picnic, and I ain't a-goin' to have the hull town a-cavortin' in this hyer dungeon, and don't you forget it!" Hairpin cried, roughly.

"Well, I come upon important business, and I've seen Captain Joe about it, too, and he said that it was all right," the half-breed—for such he claimed to be—responded, in the soft way peculiar to him. "You see, I lost a mule yesterday—as fine a beast as there was in the territory, and I didn't know but what this gentleman might have come across the animal in his travels, see?" and as Yampas finished, he slipped a small flask into the hand of Hairpin.

"Oh, sartin! If you come on business, that is a boss of another color. Go ahead and speechify all you like!" and the big fellow immediately proceeded to investigate in regard to the contents of the flask, while Yampas approached the Californian, who regarded him with considerable curiosity.

"I come to inquire about a mule which I thought you might have met with in your travels," Yampas began; and, then, casting a rapid glance over his shoulder, and perceiving that the jailer was too busy sampling the whisky to pay any attention to anything else, he lowered his tone and whispered, rapidly: "Right behind you there are two loose boards; a touch of the hand will dislodge them and give you room to pass through. Twenty paces on there's a good horse picketed. Once on his back it will be the fiend's luck if you cannot escape from the town. Here is a revolver, loaded and capped. I will meet you to-night about twelve, three miles up the river just above Fort Mohave. There's a bend in the stream and a bunch of cottonwood timber there, so that you won't miss the place. You can see where the boards are by looking for the marks of the saw. While the trial was going on we put up this job here. This big brute will be called out of the room in a moment—that is to give you a chance to escape. So you haven't seen anything of a large gray-white mule?" he continued, raising his voice. "Caramba! I am sorry. I would sooner give twenty dollars than to lose that mule!"

"Wa-al, gi'n me the money, and if I see the animal I will hold on to her for you!" Hairpin exclaimed, jocosely.

"Oh, no; I will hold on to the money until I see the mule," and then the half-breed took his departure, leaving the Fresh in a state of considerable amazement.

A few minutes before he had declared that he did not have a friend in the town, man or woman, and, lo and behold! here a friend had sprung up to aid him.

So unreal did the episode seem that he would have found it difficult to believe that his ears had served him correctly had he not felt the solid substance of the revolver in his bosom, whither he had thrust it for concealment. And then, too, he glanced searchingly at the wall and there, sure enough, across the boards he could detect the line of the saw.

At the very time when he was being tried for his life, and believed that he was utterly friendless and alone, preparations were on foot for his rescue.

The thought came to him—might not this be a trap to compass his death? might there not be armed men lying in wait without who would riddle him with bullets when he made his appearance in the open air? But after a moment's reflection he dismissed the idea as being unworthy of credence. His death by the rope seemed certain enough; why then should any one wish to expedite matters?

Soon one of the guards at the inner door which led into the saloon poked his head in at the portal, and waving a bottle invited Hairpin to come and take a drink.

"All right; I'm your old he-b'ar!" the mule-skinner exclaimed, and forgetting his orders not to lose sight of the prisoner, he passed through the open doorway and pulled the door shut behind him.

This was the moment to act. He ran to the side of the room where the boards had been sawed. In these Western shanties the wall consists of one thickness of boards only, no plastering. The boards yielded under the strong pressure of his hand and tumbled outward, leaving an open space amply large enough for him to pass through.

To go through the hole was but the work of a moment, and, as the half-breed had said, a few yards off a horse was tethered.

With the speed of a deer the Californian bounded over the ground, jerked the lariat up and sprung into the saddle; but, not unobserved, as ill-luck would have it.

A group of fellows busy in conversation down the street saw the escape, and at once gave the alarm.

"Stop him! stop him!" they cried at the top of their lungs.

"What's the matter?" cried an old hunter,

who had just come into the town from a trip up the Colorado.

"A murderer is escaping!" yelled a man in the crowd.

"Whar—that man on the hoss?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Oh, I'll fetch him!" cried the hunter, and up came the trusty rifle to his shoulder; a moment he glanced along the glittering tube with his keen eye, leveling it full at the flying steed, urged onward by the fugitive at its best pace, and then came the little tongue of fire in the midst of a smoke puff and the sharp report resounded on the clear air.

The horse gave a single convulsive leap as the well-aimed bullet struck it, and then came down all in a heap, stone dead.

So sudden was the shock that the Fresh, skillful rider though he was, caught a "burst," and was tossed clean over the animal's head.

The soft prairie soil received him kindly, though, and in a second he was on his feet, pretty well shaken up by the force of the fall, but in no way injured.

His first thought was to continue his flight on foot, but half a dozen of the citizens who had joined in the hue and cry were mounted, and a moment's reflection convinced him that he stood no chance at all to escape.

Luck was dead against him this time for certain. Fully thirty armed men were after him, counting both horse and foot, and, although at first when he found that his escape was cut off, his impulse was to show fight and to find a death rather by the bullets of his pursuers than by the rope of the hangman, yet upon the old adage occurring to him—while there was life there was hope—he concluded to yield to circumstances and surrender quietly. He had not drawn the revolver from his breast, and now that he saw how things were he was very glad that he had not.

"No one knows that it is there," he murmured to himself, "and at the last moment perhaps it may serve my turn."

Keno Bill was the first to reach the side of the fugitive.

As the crowd came on the Fresh had displayed his open hands, so as to show them that he did not meditate any resistance.

"Well, you didn't make the rifle this time!" Alcibiades remarked, as he rode up.

"No, but I made a good try for it, though, and if it hadn't been for my friend with the rifle, I reckon that no man in this crowd would have been able to put salt on my tail."

"Better luck next time, old man!" ejaculated the sheriff, Jake Hairpin, who came up at this moment, blowing like a porpoise from his exertions.

"Nice man you are to look arter a prisoner!" Keno Bill exclaimed, in contempt.

"Nice kind of a house you've got, whar a man can kick the hull eend-board out, and light for the setting sun, right afore my own two-looking eyes!" and Jake winked at the prisoner, as much as to say keep quiet, and don't tell on a fellow.

"We will try and keep you safer this time. I was a big fool that I didn't examine the walls, but, who would have thought of such a thing?" Bill remarked. "I reckon, though, that you ain't so friendless in this hyer camp as you try to make out."

California Jehn did not take the trouble to reply, and the procession slowly proceeded back to the spot from whence the chase had started.

The prisoner was placed in his former quarters, the hole in the side of the house nailed up, and a careful examination instituted, so as to be sure that there wasn't any more weak points. Bill was bound that the prisoner should stay where he was put this time.

CHAPTER XII.

ALCIBIADES'S IDEA.

THE gloom of the night was just beginning to thicken over the town of Needle Bar when Keno Bill came stalking into the store of Captain Joe.

Kersand's place was a great resort for the loungers of the town, particularly with those who were of an economical turn of mind, for if a man "loafed" around a saloon it involved the obligation of treating once in a while, and to stand a "round" for a crowd of six to ten fellows with drinks at two bits apiece was no joke to a man unless his buckskin bag was well lined. But, in Kersand's store a man was under no obligation to purchase anything unless he wanted so to do. No liquors were sold by the glass, although a full stock was carried for the accommodation of customers, and the captain kept a private bottle in the little room back of the store, his office by day and his bedroom by night, and to the contents of this private bottle important buyers were heartily welcome.

For a wonder the store was bare of customers when Alcibiades entered, and the captain sat on one of the counters swinging his legs in a sort of a brown study. It was just about supper-time and the men of the town were busy about the evening meal. Be it remarked in passing that nearly all the men of the town kept "bachelor's hall"—very few indeed being provided with helpmates.

Alcibiades nodded to the captain and took his seat upon the cracker barrel which stood at one end of the counter.

Kersands, roused from his abstraction, took a look at his visitor and Bill in return took a look at him.

Each noticed that the other was unusually serious, and as a rule neither one of the two was noted for this sort of thing.

"I have kinder been a-cogitating over matters and things in general," Alcibiades remarked, taking out his jack-knife, springing out the blade and beginning to jab the point into the cover of the barrel.

"Well, sir, I reckon that to a chap who uses his head at all thar has been mighty good cause for a man to put on his thinking-cap in this hyer town since the sun went down last night," replied the store-keeper.

"What do you think of this hyer affair, anyway?"

"'Bout the murder?"

"Yes; do you think that we have got hold of the right chap?"

"I do; I reckon thar ain't much doubt on that pint. Didn't he go for to give leg-bail the furst chance he got?"

"That's so; but, seeing as how death was a-grinning right in his face he would have been a fool if he hadn't."

"But, who put up the job? Who sawed the boards in the wall, and who provided the hoss outside? The feller says that he don't know anybody in the town, but he must have some pals round or else the trick couldn't have been worked."

"In my opinion thar is a gang of them," the Keno King declared. "So fur we hain't been troubled much with anything of that sort in this camp, and it is only nat'ral to suppose that sooner or later a gang will come in and try to run the town. All camps have got to go through with that sort of thing, you know, and between you and me and the bed-post, cap'n, I shouldn't be in the least surprised if we have a heap of trouble with this feller afore we get through with him."

"I reckon we will get through with him tomorrow," the store-keeper observed.

"Yes, if he don't give us the slip to-night."

"Well, Bill, you ain't the man I take you to be if you let that happen."

"I won't, unless this feller and his gang are smarter than I think they are; but, I say, cap'n, who do you s'pose fixed the thing, who sawed the boards and who told the feller of it? There was only two people in to see him, Charley Yampas, who had an idea that the man might know something 'bout a stray mule of his'n, and the Doc."

"I don't take much stock in that air medicine-man. I think he would sell his own father for whisky if he couldn't get it any other way," Kersands averred.

"Well, cap'n, I 'spect you have sized him down 'bout right. I have an idea that it was the doctor who acted as a messenger between this sharp and his pals on the outside, and I have made up my mind to keep a mighty keeful watch onto him. But, cap'n, setting this matter aside, I have been thinking over this hyer gal left all alone and unprotected. 'Pears to me like as if she had a mighty hard road ahead on her."

"Well, Bill, it does look kinder that way," the store-keeper admitted.

"Thar ain't much call for any sich women as she is in any sich camp as this hyer."

"Not much call, Bill," and the captain shook his head solemnly.

"'Pears to me as if something has got to be done for her, though."

"Yes, 'pears so," but in his own mind the veteran thought that if the girl had not been a very paragon of womankind, the long-headed Alcibiades would never have troubled his brains about her.

"Yes, sir; something has got to be done for the gal, seeing as how she has been left all alone and unprotected right hyer in our town. We might all chip in and raise a subscription, you know, to send her home, but, as fur as I kin find out, the gal ain't got any home or friends on top of this hyer earth."

"'Pears so, Bill; 'pears so."

"Of course I would be glad to give her a chance to come and clerk at my place, but a keno saloon ain't exactly the sort of a ranch to stick any sich handsome heifer in as this 'ere beauty."

"No, Bill; some wild galoot would be sure to shoot off his mouth at her, and then thar would be trouble, of course, for she ain't the kind of a gal to stand any nonsense, I should say."

"Not much; and it wouldn't be healthy for any man to try it on when I was 'round," a savage expression upon his face.

"And that is whar the trouble would come in, you see. Why, Bill, a gal like this critter in a place like yours would be good for a funeral a day. She would make business lively for the Hunchback, but it would be mighty bad for the town."

"Oh, it ain't to be thought on, cap'n; but I tell you what it is, I have kinder made up my mind that the girl ought to be seen arter, and I

reckon thar ain't any man in this town who kin chip into sich a game any better than a man 'bout my size."

The captain nodded approvingly.

"Now, I have been thinking over the matter, and I reckon I have found a place for the gal where she will fit as snug as a bug in a rug."

"You don't say so?" and the store-keeper looked amazed. He couldn't for the life of him think of any opening that the camp afforded for an honest girl to get a decent living, particularly such a ladylike creature as Miss Romero.

"Oh, yes, I have been speculating on it, and I reckon I have got it down fine," Alcibiades continued. "This hyer town needs a furst-class hotel, a reg'lar bang-up place, you know; furst-chop, Eastern style; none of your Grand-Central-Mickey-Lynch's dive; I own that vacant lot, you know, right side of my place, and I have made up my mind to put up a hotel thar that shall jest knock anything down along this line. Jest as soon as we hang this sharp to-morrow, and so get this little business settled up, I will pitch right into it. I'll make it threestories high, with a what-do-you-call-it on top, and a flag-pole, and I will put this gal in to run it; nothing for her to do, you know, but to play the lady and take in the cash. I want to call it some big name; how would the Colorado Palace Hotel do?"

"Bully, Bill; couldn't be better."

"Oh, I will do the thing up mighty fine now, when I've waded in, and don't you forget it."

"No doubt about that, Bill, for you have got the dust to back you."

"Well, I hain't lost any money since I struck this hyer town; and in fact, cap'n, as I am pretty well fixed now I am getting kinder tired of this talk 'bout Keno Bill. I don't like the name, and I want to get shut of it as soon as I kin. The keno shop is all right; it pays like a gold mine, but for all that I had just as lieves not be so much mixed up in it."

"I say, Bill, I reckon that if you succeed in carrying out this leetle plan, the gal and you might conclude to hitch teams one of these days," the store-keeper suggested, with a sly chuckle.

Alcibiades closed one eye and winked significantly with the other.

"Well, such a thing might happen," he admitted, "and I must say that she is 'bout the only gal I have seen for many a long year who has at all struck my fancy. And if I make up my mind to go for her, what man is there 'round this hyer town who would be able to take her from me?"

CHAPTER XIII.

AN ODD REQUEST.

"NARY man, Bill; thar ain't one of 'em that could do it!" the veteran admitted.

"That is what I think. Well, the race is open to anybody, and I don't see why I shouldn't enter for the prize as well as the next man. At any rate I have made up my mind to take a hand in the game, and if I don't win it won't be for the want of trying."

"You'll win, Bill; I would be willing to bet my bottom dollar on it!" the store-keeper declared, enthusiastically.

At that moment a form, stepping into the doorway, obscured the light, which was rapidly growing more and more dim as the clouds of evening lowered.

Both of the men looked to see who it was, and both were equally amazed to discover that it was the very lady who had been the subject of their conversation.

The veteran sprang from his seat and hastened to the door, while Bill slowly dismounted from the cracker barrel and leaned up against the counter.

The girl in her perfect beauty looked like a picture framed in the doorway, and it was no wonder that the breath of William Alcibiades came thick and hard, and his heart beat violently, thumping against his ribs as it were, while a muttered vow came from his lips.

"By all the powers of fate, I'll have this girl no matter how much it costs to win her or who stands in my way!"

The girl had hesitated timidly in the doorway as if uncertain about entering, and the captain hastened to bid her welcome to his domicile.

"Walk right in, miss; don't be afeared; you are among friends hyer, and anything that we kin do for you we will do right gladly. Ain't that so, Mr. Alcibiades?" and he turned appealingly toward Keno Bill.

"Oh yes, miss; you can jest count on us, every time," the master of the keno shop assured, doffing his hat and making quite a gallant bow.

"I am ever so much obliged," the girl replied, advancing a yard or two into the store, while the captain hastened to close the door behind her.

"Some of our boys ain't got any too much sense, miss," he explained, "and if any of the dunderheads happened to pass by and see'd you in hyer, they wouldn't have no better manners than to stare right in at you, jest as if you was a wild beast on exhibition."

Meanwhile Alcibiades had hunted up a chair in the back office and brought it out to the lady,

"You are so very kind," she murmured, as she accepted the seat. "Every one is so very kind that I really do not know how to find words to express my thanks."

"Well, miss, if you don't know how, don't try," the captain remarked, humorously.

"I am all alone here, since the death—the sudden, cruel and mysterious death of my protector—and now that I feel the need of counsel and assistance I hardly know how to act."

"Now, miss, let me put you right on that 'ere pint!" Alcibiades exclaimed. "You ain't alone, in this hyer town, and you mustn't allow yourself to think that you are. You have got a heap of friends hyer—friends who will stick by you tighter than wax. If you want anything, all you have got to do is to explain what it is; if it is advice, why, thar are some pretty long heads in this hyer camp, and I reckon all you have to do is to say the word and they will do their level best for you. If it is money, jest say how much and I will bet 'bout all I am worth it won't be long afore the sum total is scared up!"

The lady had fixed her dark and brilliant eyes full upon the face of the speaker, and the Keno King suddenly became impressed with the idea that the girl wore a mask; almost heavenly as were the glorious eyes; yet, looking into their depths was like gazing at the surface of a deep pool which reflected only the face of the observer and afforded not the slightest indication of what lay beneath. It was the charming face of a child just blooming into glorious womanhood, yet it was as thoroughly under the control of its owner as the face of a woman of forty, trained by years of bitter experience to believe that dissimulation was a virtue.

The more the crafty and unscrupulous Alcibiades looked at the beautiful girl the stronger became his conviction that she might turn out to be a very dangerous woman, but not in the slightest degree did this belief turn Keno Bill from the purpose which he had formed.

The more dangerous the woman, the more his skill and the greater his triumph if he succeeded in winning her.

The captain, not so much interested in the lady as his companion, and a man of much duller comprehension, saw only a charming young girl, friendless and alone, and the suspicion never occurred to him that she might be able to take good care of herself, helpless as she appeared.

"You are very kind, indeed; every one here is so kind," the girl repeated, and all the while her face as devoid of expression as though it was of marble. "But, I do not need money; Mr. Wentworth always kept me well provided."

"I reckon that you want a leetle advice, then," half queried the captain.

"Yes; advice is what I need."

"We will do the best we can for you, miss," Alcibiades mechanically remarked.

"Oh, yes, miss, don't be afraid of speaking out. We will do our very best for you, every time!" the store-keeper added, encouragingly.

"It is in regard to the mysterious death of my protector—"

"Ah, but we have got the man, miss!" Keno Bill assured. "We have got him safe enough, and though he made a pretty bold dash for liberty this afternoon yet we managed to corral him again."

"And are you sure that he is the man who did the deed?"

"Well, yes; as sure as any one can be of a thing of that sort. Of course no one saw the murder committed, but the evidence against the man is strong enough to hang a dozen, let alone one."

"Not much doubt about it, miss. He had a fair trial, and the boys are all pretty well agreed that even if he didn't do the job himself he knows who did do it. You see they have kinder got the idea into their heads that there is a gang mixed up in this matter, and that this fellow is the chief of the party," the store-keeper explained.

"And he will be hung, then, to-morrow?"

"Yes, unless he contrives to give us the slip to-night, and I reckon he won't be able to do that, smart as he is," Keno Bill averred.

"But why should he commit such a foul deed; what motive was there for it?"

The question was too much for the pair, so they shook their heads.

"He does not admit that he had anything to do with it?" she continued.

"Nary time! He's as stubborn as a mule 'bout that, and swears he never even saw the man," Alcibiades announced.

"If he is the guilty man, there must have been some powerful motive to urge him on. Such a horrid crime could not have been committed recklessly and without cause. I cannot understand it, and, now that the man is so near to death, why should he not speak and tell what induced him to stain his soul with such a crime?"

"The hope of escape keeps his mouth shet, I reckon," Keno Bill replied. "He won't believe that his death is sartin until he feels the rope around his neck."

"Will you let me see him?" asked the girl, abruptly, as if it was a sudden inspiration.

"Perhaps to me, the creature left friendless and alone, he may speak."

The store-keeper, deceived by the girl's impulsive manner, assented at once; and Bill, although he felt sure that it was for this alone the girl had come, did not see how he could object, although he feared it meant mischief.

"Come right along with me," the captain said. "I will take you up to the calaboose, and, mebbe, he might talk a leetle bit to you."

"You are so kind," the girl murmured, and, bidding Alcibiades good-evening, she departed with the store keeper.

"She's up to some game, I bet," was the Keno King's decided opinion.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE STORY OF THE GIRL.

"You jest attend to the shanty for me a few min'tes," the captain requested, as he departed with the lady. And Bill sat down on the doorstep, and, with a lowering face, watched the pair until they were lost to sight around the corner of the keno saloon.

To the rear door of Alcibiades's retreat the captain conducted the girl. The two guards, who were sitting down in front of the portal, got up and respectfully made way for the pair to enter.

Within the room, with a table between them, on which was placed a lighted candle, sat the jailer and the prisoner, engaged in a friendly game of "seven up." The mule-driver's money had given out, the Fresh's successful coup at poker having cleaned him of his cash, and as there was no fun in playing poker without money, the gentleman from Hualpais had suggested "seven-up" to pass the time away.

But, whether at seven up or at poker, the muleteer was no match for California John. Such a man as turning up jacks, and thereby scoring points, Jake Hairpin had never before encountered. He even accomplished seeming impossibilities with the greatest of ease, for, when Hairpin, with malice aforethought, stole every jack in the pack, and got them corraled in his boot-leg, his opponent, on the very next deal, flipped up a jack with the same ease and grace as before, and the discomfited mule-skinner couldn't help remarking that he "reckoned there must be five jacks in this 'ere pack, too," and in his mental calculation he tried to figure out how many packs of cards the other must have secreted about his person to be thus flush with face cards upon the slightest provocation.

"This lady would like to have a few minutes' talk with you, John," the captain said, as he introduced Miss Romero into the apartment.

The prisoner rose and bowed in an easy, graceful way.

"Shall I wait for you, miss, or will you find your way to the hotel alone?" the captain asked.

"Oh, no, thank you; I could not think of putting you to so much trouble," she replied.

"No trouble at all," the store-keeper answered, gallantly. "And I say, John," and he turned to the prisoner; "if I was you I would answer this lady's questions if you kin, 'cos it won't make much difference to you now, anyhow, for you will be a goner to-morrow, sure as shooting!"

"Never say die, you know; that is my motto!" was his confident answer.

"That is all right; keep your courage up, but if you will take my advice you will put your house in order for another world." Then the captain withdrew.

John, placing a chair for Miss Romero, politely invited her to be seated.

She complied and then cast a glance at the jailer, who had taken up the cards and was preparing to amuse himself at a game of solitaire.

"This is my jailer, the sheriff for the nonce, Mr. Hairpin," the Californian explained.

"I would like to have a few minutes' conversation with you alone," she remarked—"that is if this gentleman does not object," and she bent the full power of her brilliant eyes upon Hairpin. And the mule-skinner, rough and uncultivated beast that he was, could not resist the influence of her magnetic beauty.

"Wa-al, you see, miss, that is strictly ag'in' the rules," he replied. "This hyer gentleman is a slippery sort of cuss; he has managed to slide outen hyer once and the boys are mighty well skeered lest he does it ag'in. And if he should make tracks, I reckon the crowd would be mad enough to string me up in his place, and 'tween you and me and the bed-post I ain't quite ready to pass in my checks yet."

"I will give you my word of honor not to attempt to escape, if that will satisfy you," the prisoner said.

"If you will be so kind as to break through the rules for this once I shall be ever so much obliged to you," the lady remarked, with her sweetest smile.

As Hairpin observed afterward: "A gal with a smile like that was capable of making a man murder his own grandmother."

"All right, miss; dur'd if I don't risk it this time, but it is my own neck that I am a-stakin'."

"Have no fear; I give you my word that I

will not attempt to escape, even though the way was open before me, until you return again to this room."

"Fairer couldn't be said; so go ahead and chin all you like while I step out," and with this admonition the mule-driver vanished into the saloon.

The girl rose noiselessly from her seat and examined both the doors as if to be certain that they were tightly closed. Evidently she was determined there should be no listeners to the interview. She then turned to the prisoner.

"Be seated, please," she said, "for I fancy we shall have much to say to each other."

She moved her chair close to his own and sat down by his side; then she looked him firmly in the face for a few minutes with a fixed and earnest gaze, and the Fresh on his part, fully as interested as she, thought that he had never seen a more beautiful girl.

"You are innocent of this foul deed?" she said at last.

"Upon my life I am," he replied, earnestly.

"And yet you have been convicted and will be punished for it unless some lucky chance intervenes to save you."

"Yes, there isn't much doubt about that; I am the victim of a popular prejudice. A crime has been committed, and, from the nature of the deed, the peculiar and mysterious way in which it was perpetrated, a panic has arisen. The people are clamorous for a victim, and as I happen to be the first one handy, they intend to put me through."

"But, isn't there any chance that you may escape from this fearful doom?"

The Californian took a good look at his questioner. Was this beautiful girl, after all, only a spy sent by men fierce for his blood to discover whether or not he still cherished hopes of escape or a rescue from the doom which seemed so certain? He read naught but honesty in the charming face, the deep, dark eyes of which were looking so earnestly into his own.

"Oh, yes; until man is really cold in death, there is always a chance for life," he said at last.

"And can I be of any service to you?" the girl asked, in evident earnestness.

"And you would aid me if you could?" he questioned, and there was just a little doubt in the query.

"Yes, for I believe you are innocent. You had no acquaintance with Jason Wentworth, or Martin Kenyon, for that was his true name."

"You are right; I never saw or even heard of the man. From what I have learned, though, since I have been accused of his death, he was in the keno saloon while I was there, but, as there was quite a crowd in the place I did not happen to notice him. If there had been any grudge between us—if we had ever met, or had had any trouble, there would be a reason for the deed. But the men of this camp have got it into their heads that a gang is about to invade the town, and they look upon me as the advance guard, so they are going to string me up as a warning to the others to keep away."

"For five years I have accompanied this man who has been so mysteriously slain, on his restless, uncertain way through the world, and I am sure that you and he were not intimately associated during that time, for I was well acquainted with all his affairs. Of his life before that I know nothing, except that his career has been a checkered one, and that he has more often been in the dark valley of adversity than basking in the sunlight of prosperity. I know, too, that in the past he has been known by a dozen different names. I have never known him but by one until to-day, and then, carefully examining all that he left behind him, I found in his valise a secret pocket in the lining, which contained a few old papers. From one of them I gathered that his right name was Martin Kenyon, and this same paper gave me a clew to a foe who evidently bore him a hatred which could only be satisfied by death."

CHAPTER XV.

WHO SHE WAS.

THE Fresh listened with the utmost attention; this was important indeed.

From her bosom the lady drew a folded paper—a paper worn with age, evidently an old letter, and opening it gave it to the prisoner.

As he had surmised, it was a letter, and written by a woman's hand, although the writing was bold and masculine. It was brief, and read as follows:

"MARTIN KENYON: For the last time I give you a chance to redeem your word. If you do not accept it, then beware, for the wrath of the roused lions robbed of her cubs will be as nothing to the rage which will inspire me, and to that just anger, as surely as there is a Heaven above us, you will fall a victim. Go where you will, earth shall not hold a spot so secluded as to hide you from my vengeance. You know where to find me. Bring or send me what I seek, or else look to yourself."

There was no signature. The prisoner read it aloud, a curious look upon his face; then turning it over examined it in the most careful manner.

"There is no date or signature—nothing to

indicate when it was written, or where, or by whom."

"It is in a woman's hand and threatens vengeance, and from the appearance of the paper it was penned some years ago; I am sure it was before I left my convent to accompany this man on his wild, dangerous and uncertain life, for, ever since I have known anything about him he has been afraid of secret foes; he was constantly on the move and constantly taking particular care to cover up his movements so as to prevent any one from following him. If he designed to proceed southward, he invariably said that he intended to go to the north. Never, by any chance, did he reveal to a single soul the true direction whither he had made up his mind to wend his way. Nor did he even trust me with the secret. I knew no more when we set out where our journey would end than if I had been a perfect stranger to him. Often I surmised that the name he bore was not his true appellation; often did I think that he must have great cause for fear or else he would not take so many precautions; for in all things else he was one of the most bold and reckless of men."

"In Heaven's name, miss, what bond of union was there between such a fair young creature as yourself and this man who was evidently an adventurer of the worst type?" exclaimed the Californian, unable to restrain the curiosity that devoured him.

"He was my father!"

"Your father?"

"Or at least he claimed to be, although he never bestowed upon me a parent's care or a parent's tenderness," the girl replied, bitterly. "My life is all wrapped up in mystery. From early childhood I have been the inmate of a convent. My first remembrances are of the soft-voiced, pleasant-faced sisters and the old stone walls that harbored them. And then, when I grew older, childlike, I was curious for the story of my life. Brief and unsubstantial indeed was the tale the sisters knew. I had been brought there when an infant by a gentleman who stated that cruel death had deprived him of his wife, and being about to set out on a long and perilous journey he desired to place his child in good, careful hands while he should be absent. The bills for my maintenance were paid regularly, but I never saw him until I was about ten years old; then he came one day to see me, but even then his coldness chilled the girlish love swelling up in my heart, and I looked upon him with more awe than affection. At that time he told me that, when I was five years older, he would come and take me away with him; and he was prompt to his word, for on the very day I was fifteen he removed me from the convent. He took me from that quiet, peaceful, holy life and with him I plunged at once into the world's vortex. Five long, weary, tedious years did the man who called himself my father spend in training me to the purpose for which he had intended me ever since I was a child. And because he thought that I was suited to his scheme did he provide for me. Fate had willed that I should grow to womanhood with a face calculated to prove attractive—to win friends. Upon that fact he shrewdly calculated. I was to be the decoy to win dupes to his nets, there to be fleeced of their gold. And for five years there has been a constant struggle in my breast between the teaching of the good sisters who reared me and the advice of this demon—for such he really was, whether my father or no. Step by step he undertook to supplant their pious instructions with the cunning sophistry of the world. Little by little I felt that I was slowly descending to his level. I was becoming desperate. A hundred times at least I have resolved to fly from him and seek to gain an honest living, far from these wild scenes of lawlessness and vice, but then my early teaching came to my mind, and my heart said that if he was my father it was my duty to stay with him and strive with all my feeble power to induce him to lead a better life. The end came at last—the violent and bloody death to which I have looked forward for so many long weeks. I felt sure that it would come, some time, for such a death is but the natural ending to such a life; but I did not think he would be stricken down in the silence of the night by an unknown hand; rather, I thought the end would come in some desperate brawl which so frequently disgraces the infant settlements of the frontier. He claimed to be my father; his money has nourished me, and yet now that he has gone to that long home from whence there is no returning, I cannot feel for him the sorrow which I should feel if he was really and truly my parent. The confession is a frank one; I am ashamed to make it, and yet it is the truth. I think sometimes that I have a heart of iron."

Sorrowful indeed was both the face and the voice of the girl, and the Californian easily understood that the strange life which she had led since leaving her convent had made her old beyond her years.

"Instinct is often a safe guide in such matters," he observed, "and without knowing any more of the facts than what I have learned from your recital, I feel quite certain that this

man was no kin to you; but whether a relative or not, of one thing I can assure you, and that is—his death does not lie at my door."

"Oh, I feel sure of that!" she exclaimed, immediately. "The moment I knew you were accused of the murder something within told me you were innocent, and this is the reason why I have now come to endeavor to save you."

"To save me!" the Fresh demanded, in surprise. "Yes; I have succeeded in my design to gain a private interview with you, and now cannot you arrange a plan so that by my aid you will be enabled to escape?"

Many times in his life had the adventurer been surprised, but never more than now.

Alone and helpless, he had proclaimed himself; no friend near, either man or woman; but lo! the man had come, and now appeared the woman, to say nothing of the Doctor, whose friendship was founded entirely upon sordid motives.

"You have quick wits; can you not devise some plan of escape?" she continued. "See; I have brought you a weapon," and from the folds of her dress she produced a good-sized revolver and a box of cartridges.

"I am ever so much obliged to you!" he exclaimed, gratefully, as he hid the revolver within his breast and dropped the box of cartridges into his pocket. "And really, this is so unexpected. You are about the last person in the world to whom I should have thought of looking for aid, but in this pinch friends seem to spring up around me on every side. Why, even the little Doctor came with a proposition to help me beat the game of these gentlemen who are so hungry for my life, but I was not well healed enough with dust to buy his services."

"Perhaps it would be well for me to see him," the girl observed, thoughtfully.

"Do as you please about that, but the best scheme that occurs to me is one that by your aid I think will succeed. When the time comes for my execution be you on the spot with a swift horse. Contrive to dismount in my immediate neighborhood; then I will take advantage of the first favorable chance that occurs to draw my pistols and make a dash for liberty. If I can gain the back of the horse and the chances are that I will be able to so in the confusion, there is hope of escaping the rope."

A few more words passed between the two in regard to the details of the plan, and then, calling in the sheriff, the lady departed.

Her coming was a surprise, her object in coming a greater one, but there were still more surprises in store for the Fresh that night.

CHAPTER XVI.

HAIRPIN'S LITTLE GAME.

AFTER the lady departed the sheriff inquired of the prisoner if he couldn't "tackle a leetle hash," and upon being answered in the affirmative, at once proceeded to order in the supper, and it was as good a meal as the restaurant of the Grand Central Hotel could get up, too, or at any rate so the mule-skinner declared, and (as he said himself) he wasn't usually far out of the way "whar" eating was concerned.

After supper was over and the dishes removed the two, sheriff and prisoner, sat down to another sociable game of cards, and as card-playing without money on the table is not according to Hoyle, in Gold Land, the Fresh, always willing to be accommodating, suggested the means by which Hairpin, who was completely "busted," could raise a stake. His first suggestion was that the sheriff might get a loan from some of his acquaintances in the saloon, but Hairpin shook his head.

"What's the matter? Ain't you well acquainted in this town?"

"I bet yer! and that's whar thar ain't ary bottom to the road. They know me too well. You see, I've gone broke in this hyer town afore and have raised a stake hyer, too, but I allers did hate to be pestered 'bout money, and when the cusses came round, a-shooting off their mouths 'bout their money, I jest whaled them, and that's how my credit has gone bust."

"Ever raised any money on a note?"

"One't; outhen a leetle Jew cuss wot kept a store down to Hualpa's. I got a twenty-dollar outfit, paid him ten cash and g'n him my note for t'other ten. Wa-al, when the time was up, I couldn't raise the blind and the cuss 'lowed he was going to have the law on me, so I made him eat it."

"Eat what?"

"The note, in course, and thar ain't ary man in this town that has wanted to take my note since."

"Well, under the circumstances, I am not surprised. Then you can't raise a stake anyway you can fix it?"

"Nohow that I knows on," replied the other, disconsolately.

"Nice pair of revolvers you have got there," the Fresh remarked, casting a critical eye upon the sheriff's excellent tools.

"They ought to be good. I paid fifty dollars for 'em."

"Honest?"

"Honor bright or I'm a Dutchman!"

"Pretty good pair of boots that you have got on."

"Fifteen dollars up at Prescott's or I'm a hoss-thief!"

"Not a bad pair of pantaloons, and that is a pretty good shirt—might be a little cleaner, but that is no matter."

"Say! what in thunder air you a-driving at, anyway?"

"How much is the whole outfit worth just as you stand, from head to foot?"

"What do you want to know for?"

"Why, I will buy it of you, and then you'll have a stake to gamble on."

The big fellow blinked like an owl for a few minutes as he reflected upon this astounding proposition.

"Say, you're getting a leetle looney, ain't yer?"

"Nary time, old man! It is a fair proposition. I will buy the entire outfit, one or two articles at a time, if you like, and then you will have wealth to stake upon the hazard of the die, or, to speak more correctly, upon the uncertain turn of the more uncertain card."

"Durned if I don't do it!" cried Hairpin, after thinking over the matter for a few moments, the novelty of the idea pleasing his fancy. "But shall I shuck the things in case you win them?"

"Oh, no, that won't be necessary; in case I skin you I will make a will and in it leave instructions how everything shall be disposed of after I shuffle off this mortal coil."

"Bully for you! You're a brick, every time, and don't you forget it!"

Then the twain, like a pair of old-clothes dealers, proceeded to discuss and fix the value of the different articles pertaining to the outfit of the favorite son of Hualpa's.

This took up some little time, for, as Hairpin observed, it was a very weighty matter, but an agreement was reached at last and then the sale proceeded. The sheriff objected to selling the whole outfit in a lump, because, as he justly observed, twenty-five dollars was quite enough to start on, for the "ante" had been fixed at two bits—the lowest piece of money that Arizona acknowledges—and the "limit" at five dollars, so that it wouldn't cost a man a fortune to "straddle the blind," as some mysterious operation of regal "poker" is called. And then, too, fortune might favor the clothes-seller, and if fortune was good and he was good to himself by slip deals, why, twenty-five dollars was ample capital for a man to win a small fortune.

So Hairpin again put forth his utmost endeavors, but all to no purpose. Either the Fresh was extraordinarily skillful at handling the papers, or else he was wonderfully lucky.

Whenever the pot was a big one the Californian was bound to capture it; whenever it was small and not worth having, then Hairpin was sure to have an invincible combination. Play as carefully as he could, cheat as cunningly as he might, slowly, one by one, the mule-skinner saw the articles which composed his outfit slipping away from him. At twelve o'clock all that Hairpin had left was his boots. Hat, shirt, revolvers, knife, belt, pantaloons—all had been won by the remorseless adversary; the big boots alone remained.

"You ought to 'low me 'bout twenty dollars on these hyer boots," the big keeper growled, in a most disconsolate way, as he shuffled the cards for a fresh deal.

"Just as you say, pardner; it is against my religion to crowd a man when he is going down-hill," the Fresh assured. "Twenty dollars for the boots," and he shoved the coin across the table.

Just at this moment Keno Bill and the captain came in.

"I am going to close up the ranch, Hairpin," Bill said, "and I thought I would take a look and see that everything was all right afore I turned in."

"Everything is all O. K. I tell you I am jest the kind of man to tie to in any sich leetle affair as this hyer."

"Having a little game?" the captain observed, noticing the cards and money upon the table.

"Just to help pass the time away," John explained. "Wouldn't you like to sit down and take a hand?"

But, Bill wasn't in any mood for such fun, and turned impatiently away.

"Keep a good look-out, Hairpin; remember we hold you responsible for the prisoner."

"Oh, that is all right; you kin hang me if he gits away, every time!"

Apparently assured the pair departed, and again the sheriff and the prisoner plunged into the mysteries of the fascinating game of poker.

An hour passed, and for the first time that night fortune seemed disposed to smile upon the big fellow, but it was only a little streak of good luck which was rapidly succeeded by still worse fortune than before.

At the end of the hour the boots were gone and the mule-driver sat naked, metaphorically speaking, before his antagonist.

"Wa-al, durn my skin if I ever see'd sich luck since I war hatched!" Hairpin exclaimed, in utter despair.

"Pretty tough on you, pardner; I suppose I may as well go to work to draw out my will so as to dispose of these articles together with what I leave of my own," the Fresh remarked.

"Hold on, pardner," said Hairpin, in a very mysterious manner, reaching his big paw across the table and placing it upon the arm of the other. "We kin play a leetle while longer."

"Why, what else have you got to stake?"

"Ain't a chance to get out of this hole worth something, old man?"

"You don't mean it?" exclaimed John, in the same cautious tone that the other had used.

"If I don't you may take my head and use it as a bait for cat-fish! What do you s'pose I wanted to bother with this hyer office for? W'at good is it to me? Nary nothing, you bet! I took it to help you out of this scrape, and I am going to do it too, and don't you forget it."

CHAPTER XVII.

A CUNNING TRICK.

THE Californian was more astonished by this unexpected disclosure than by all the other surprises of the day and night, as Hairpin was about the last man from whom he would have expected aid. But now the game the skinner had played was plainly to be seen. His eagerness to be appointed sheriff, his loud vaunts of answering for the prisoner with his life, and his general officiousness were all explained. He had won the confidence of the men of the camp so that he would be in a condition to assist the prisoner.

"Well, old man, I wouldn't have believed it!" the Fresh declared, earnestly.

"In course not; I played too durned sharp for all that," returned the other, with a prodigious grin, "but when these fellers corraled you I jest made up my mind that I would see you through, and I am going to do it, too, and you can jest bet all your rocks onto it."

"You believe that I am innocent then?"

"Sartin! sure as you're born! A man like you, so handy with your we'pons, so quick to get the drop on a cuss and game enough to bluff down Keno Bill right in his own ranch—fer you to steal up and knife a man with a toad-sticker no bigger than a darnin'-needle, why, I would jest as soon think of being kicked by a Chinaman. No, sir-ee! You never did that trick, and I reckon all this hyer is a put-up job by Keno Bill to rattle you into the other world; but, don't you be afeard; I'm jest a-gwine to put a spoke in his wheel."

"Well, old fellow, they say that a friend in need is a friend indeed, and I reckon you fill the bill this time."

"In course, and that is wot I'm hyer for. That is the reason why I elected myself to be sheriff. Wot in thunder did I want to bother with the thing for, hey? Nary time. It is no good! but I jest made up my mind to pull you out of the mud the moment I see'd that you were a-going to get stuck in it. Oh, when a thing of this kind is on hand I'm a derriek on wheels, when I get a-going, and don't you forget it, either!"

"Well, what is the programme? and if I escape through your aid won't it be likely to put your neck in danger?"

The mule-driver closed one eye and winked with the other in a manner which he intended to be highly significant.

"Catch a weasel asleep!" he vociferated, in a hoarse whisper. "Don't you worry 'bout that. I reckon thar ain't ary man on top of this airth wot kin play roots on me if I have a fair chance for ny money. No, sir-ee! It can't be did. I've jest had my thinking-cap on ever since this leetle fuss has been a-b'iling, and I reckon I have hit on a leetle game so that you kin slide out of this calaboose and not leave me in the hole either."

"That is the game to play."

"You bet, and I'm the galoot as kin jest play it, too, for all it's worth. It ain't often that I take a shine to a man, but when I do I'm his meat clear to the back-bone. I have been made to take water in my time—mighty few men in this hyer world wot don't git to be the under dog onc't in a while—but, never since I was fouled was it done so slick as when you raked in the persimmons in Keno Bill's place. 'Drink or fite!' but durned if you did either!"

"But about this plan of yours—ain't we losing time?"

"Oh no; we have got gobs of time. It is jest as easy and simple as kin be," and the mule-driver leaned across the table and lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper. "Keno Bill has got this hyer thing right down fine, you know. Hyer I'm right in the room with you, for to keep guard, never take my eyes off you till morning, and if I get tired and think that I am gwine to sleep, thar's a cuss outside who is to come in and take my place. Then thar's two men at the back-door and two more in the saloon at the door thar, and at one o'clock all four men are to be relieved by four fresh men, so, even if you were to get away with me, you would have a mighty hard job to git out."

"Yes, but your plan?" asked the Fresh, a little impatiently.

"Hold on, I'm a coming to it," Hairpin re-

plied, with another series of knowing winks.

"Wot is under this hyer floor?"

"The earth, of course."

Such a thing as a cellar was unknown in Needle Bar.

"Yes, but thar is 'bout a foot, or mebbe a foot and a half of space atween the boards of this hyer floor and the airth ain't thar?"

"Of course."

Like nearly all the buildings in the town that were of any account, the saloon of the Keno King was elevated about eighteen inches from the surface of the ground in order to avoid the dampness.

"I know'd a cuss onc't," said Hairpin, still cautiously speaking in a hoarse whisper, "who had the bad luck to be corraled in jest sich a box as this hyer, but they didn't put nary guard in with him, although they had a heap of galoots at the doors. Waal, some one of this hyer cuss's friends, who had a head on his shoulders wot was bigger nor a peanut, smuggled a saw in to him, and what does the corraled chap do but saw one of the boards in the floor so as to make a hole for him to git through, and when t'other parties came to look for him in the morning for to present him with a necktie made out of rope and warranted to fit, they couldn't find hair nor hoof of him. He had slid without even waiting for to bid anybody good by."

The feasibility of the scheme which the mule-driver had thought out was at once apparent to the prisoner. To saw one of the planks of the floor—only a common inch board—so as to make a hole, through which to descend to the open space below, would be an extremely easy matter and could be accomplished in a very short time indeed, provided that the task was not interrupted. And then from the open space below, which was only boarded up in the front of the building, it would be easy to reach the street.

True, there were two guards posted by the back door of the saloon, but, as their watch would be directed entirely to the door, the chances were a hundred to one against their noticing any one creeping from under the building in the darkness.

"Have you a saw?"

"You bet, and an auger on top of it," the other replied, with another prodigious grin, and then he produced a small keyhole saw and a brace with a quarter-inch bit attached, from amid deep recesses of one of his huge boots. "Thar's the articles and no mistake! This hyer boring machine is the king-pin of the outfit, though, 'cos it don't make ary bit of noise. All you have got to do is to plug the board full of holes right across, close as you kin git 'em, you know, and then use the saw for to break 'em into one another. Not much sawing, you see, and I reckon that the cusses who air on the watch outside will have to have mighty sharp ears for to hear it. Jes' pick a board over in the front corner hyer," and the big fellow moved noiselessly to the spot indicated. "Pull one of the buffler robes up round you while you work, and then, if any one should happen to come in, you kin knock off and snuggle down like as if you was snoozing."

"But when they come in the morning and discover that I am gone, how will you get out of the scrape?"

"They will diskiver me sleeping away like a house afire, and I shall jest sw'ar that you guv me a single drink outen a leetle bottle of the queerest-tasting whisky that I ever h'isted into my stomach, and that arter I drank it I didn't know nothing. Jest you take the tools with you, so as to kinder kiver the thing up."

The Californian at once set to work, and in a short time indeed severed one of the boards so as to form a trap-door sufficiently large for him to pass through into the open space beneath.

"But how 'bout this hyer plunder that you skinned me out of?" asked Hairpin, as the Fresh disappeared through the hole in the floor to the darkness beneath.

"Keep it in exchange for the tools; a fair exchange is no robbery!"

Again was the Californian free from the toils which had surrounded him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A HAZARDOUS ADVENTURE.

AFTER the prisoner disappeared in the darkness Hairpin stretched himself out on the buffalo-robes which he pulled over in front of the rear door and in ten minutes was sound asleep.

And those ten minutes which the mule-driver spent in wooing the god of sleep were anxious ones indeed to the fugitive lurking beneath the building. He could not pass out into the street for there were two gangs of half-drunken men, one at each end of the building, noisily debating whether to go home or to call upon some other drinking-shop which had not yet closed its doors and "make a night of it," as one suggested.

At last one of the parties moved to the front of the building and the Californian was allowed to crawl out into the open air; the night was quite dark, although the moon was slowly rising, but the Fresh happened to be in the shadow of the building and his eyes, not yet used to the gloom, could not distinguish objects a

yard away and so before he had taken three steps, after rising to an upright position, he tumbled over a man lying prostrate upon the ground and came down with considerable force.

The man whom he had disturbed in this unceremonious way, and whom at first the fugitive had been afraid was dead, quickly proved that he was alive and only under the influence of liquor by rolling over with a drunken grunt.

A bright idea at once flashed upon the Californian. Now that he was free from his prison-pen about the only danger that was to be feared was that he would be recognized by some of the stragglers around the town before he could get out of it. His appearance was so marked—his dress so different from that worn by the rest of the men that he could hardly hope to escape recognition.

But this drunken man afforded a golden opportunity, and the Fresh knelt down and examined him. He was roughly dressed after the usual fashion—big boots, pantaloons tucked into them, flannel shirt and broad-brimmed felt hat, very much the worse for wear, but in addition he had on a rubber-cloth poncho, as the square blanket with the slit in the center through which the head is put is called. This garment, if garment it can be termed, when worn, completely covers two-thirds of the wearer's body with its folds. A luckier discovery than this poncho just at the present moment the Fresh could not have made, for a more complete disguise, without seeming to be a disguise, could not have been procured if the fugitive had had the shops of a town from which to choose.

With scant ceremony the Californian stripped the poncho off the drunken man, not however without a vigorous chorus of protesting grunts from the sleeper, annoyed at having his rest disturbed; then he took possession of his hat, leaving his own in exchange.

The poncho and hat he adjusted upon his person, pulling the brim of the latter down over his eyes so as to hide his features. Then an idea occurred to him; he rubbed his hand on the soft, black, moist soil and with the dirt discolored all the lower part of his face so as to give him the appearance of needing a clean shave pretty badly; and, thanks to these simple precautions, he presented an exceedingly disreputable appearance.

The last precaution he took was to remove the revolvers, with which he had been provided so unexpectedly, from his bosom, and swing them in the holsters attached to his belt. Then he stepped boldly out from the shelter of the shadow cast by the saloon and walked openly down the street.

As yet he had not made up his mind in which direction to go, but when he came to reflect upon the matter as he walked along he came to the conclusion that he would keep the appointment suggested by the unknown friend who had come so unexpectedly to his aid. He would go straight to the river and then follow its course northward toward Fort Mohave until he came to the cottonwood grove.

But, men propose and fate disposes, and, although the way seemed clear enough for him to walk through the town, (the streets of which were now almost deserted, two or three squads of roystering miners, more or less under the influence of liquor, generally more than less, alone breaking the stillness of the night with their Indian-like howls,) yet he was fated to encounter a formidable obstacle before he had gone a hundred paces.

He had marched boldly along right down the main street, calculating that he would not attract half as much attention by so doing, as by skulking along as though he was afraid of being recognized.

The way seemed clear when, suddenly, from out of one of the low drinking saloons came a gang of four men, all much under the influence of liquor. They were right in the way, and as the Californian turned to one side to avoid them, they hailed him as a brother.

They were all teamsters, and all rigged out in ponchos and big hats, exactly like the man whose outward semblance the fugitive had assumed.

At first sight the Fresh believed that he would either have to run or fight, for, from the manner of their dress he was afraid that he had stumbled upon the companions of the drunken man, but upon this point he was immediately set right.

"Hello! Whar are you bound, pardner?" one of the drunken fellows cried. "Don't be skeered! We're first-class gentlemen, every mother's son of us, and if you don't believe it, come and take a drink!"

By the aid of the just rising moon the fugitive was enabled to get a good view of the party, and as far as he could make out, they were all strangers; at any rate he did not remember ever to have seen any of them before, and as the Californian had a good memory for faces, he felt pretty sure that this gang had but recently arrived at "The Bar," so had not been present at his trial.

All had drank too much liquor to be classed as sober, and yet had not swallowed enough to be completely drunk. And with men in such con-

dition the easiest way was most decidedly the best; so the fugitive attempted to get rid of them with a well-feigned excuse.

"Boys, you'll have to let me cut to-night, 'cos I'm in a hurry to reach the camp, as I've got to take my turn on watch, and I reckon that I am late, now," he said, assuming the rough and drawing tones of a South-western mule driver to perfection.

It was the custom of the large outfits, when they reached the neighborhood of a town where supplies were to be procured, to go into camp on the outskirts, and the regular night-watch of the march was always kept up.

"Oh, durn yer watch!" cried one of the party, who, thanks to the influence of the potent liquor which he had drank, had reached that stage when the heart in its generosity believes that all mankind are brothers. "If yer don't go 'long and h'ist a little p'ison with us yer no gen'laman!"

"Whar you from, any way?" cried another.

"Hualpais," answered the Fresh, giving the first name that came into his head.

"Good enough!" exclaimed another; "I've been thar, and now you have got to drink with me, for sure!"

"W'at's yer handle, stranger?" asked the man who had first spoken, and who seemed to be the leader of the party.

"Tom Jones," answered John, without the least hesitation.

"Howd'y! Mr. Jones!" cried the fourth one of the gang, pulling off his hat and conning the stranger with a profound bow and true drunken gravity.

"Tom Jones of Hualpais," said another; "waal, that will do. I knowed a Jones out 'way back in old York State, and seeing as how your name is Jones, you have got to drink with this 'ere crowd or fight!"

"You bet! that is our platform, every time!" chimed in the chief spirit of the gang.

So the Californian, thinking it the easiest way to get rid of them, consented to go.

Another low saloon was visited and the drinks ordered.

Down went the fiery liquid and then followed an awkward discovery. In replacing his glass upon the counter the Fresh turned his back upon the chief of the party.

"If you said that your name was Tom Jones, and you came from Hualpais, you are a liar!" he cried, angrily.

CHAPTER XIX.

A LEETLE DIFFICULTY.

ABOUT the most astonished one in the room at these words was the man to whom they were addressed.

Ordinarily such an epithet bestowed upon California John would have provoked bloodshed, but now he must avoid any quarrel if he could avoid it. But how, in the name of wonder, did the man discover that he had given a false name and address?

"What is the matter with you—what dog has bit you?" the Californian demanded, roughly turning upon the fellow.

"You have lied, that's all!" the fellow persisted, in a very offensive way, with his right hand upon the butt of his revolver.

Small good would this have done the speaker if California John had thought it was his cue to fight, for beneath his poncho his left hand had drawn one of the revolvers from its holster, and the thumb was on the hammer ready for instant action, so that before the man could have got his tool out he would have been bored, for the Californian's left hand was fully as expert as the right with the weapon.

But it was not John's game to fight.

"Course you have lied!" cried another one of the party upon whom John had turned his back in facing the boss of the gang.

The Californian wheeled in astonishment to look at this new assailant, and the other two of the party, who now for the first time beheld his back, took up the same cry.

"Durned if you hain't lied, cuss you!"

"What do you mean?" John demanded, unable to make head or tail of this strange matter.

"Why, you've got yer name on the back of your poncho, you sneaking polecat!" the leading spirit of the party fairly howled, boiling over with rage at the very idea of the stranger's imposition. "Thar it is, in big white letters, 'Jim Yards, Mohave City!'"

"Yes, sir, thar it is, Jim Yards, Mohave City!" yelled the rest in chorus.

For a moment the sport was taken aback. This was a contingency not counted upon, but his quick wits soon came to his aid.

"Oh, that's all right, boys," he protested.

"You are right and you ain't right. This hyer poncho does belong to Jim Yards, and that's my hazzle, and Mohave City is my camp, but Tom Jones is my old side-pardner, and he and me change names once in a while jest for the fun on it and that is how it happened. Why, I wouldn't go for to deceive such a crowd as you are for no money; you couldn't hire me to do it! I clean forgot about the name on the blanket, but I put it on thar, gentlemen, so that no durned rooster could walk off with it and sw'ar

that it was his'n. But, these little mistakes will happen, gentlemen, you know; but step to the front, boys, and I'll set 'em up this time. Nominate your p'ison! Take a drink all of you with Jim Yards of Mohave City, the biggest little town this side of Frisco, and don't you forget it! Set 'em up for Jim Yards this time!"

But for once John had overshot the mark. The gang were just drunk enough to be ugly and suspicious; the explanation was not received with a very good grace, and to add to the Californian's difficulties an old codger who had been asleep in a chair awoke just then and heard the last part of the speech.

"Wot's that?" he muttered, and he fixed his bleared eyes upon the face of the Fresh. "Jim Yards! An' wot about Jim Yards, hey? I knowed a Jim Yards onc't; I reckon that I knew him mighty well, too, for he was a gay galoot and could carry more liquor than any two-legged man I ever see'd."

Here was a fresh complication, but the Fresh, realizing that a bold front alone could carry him through, rose equal to the occasion.

"My name is Jim Yards, old man, and don't you forget it!" he responded. "Jim Yards, of Mohave City, but I disremember ever seeing you before, anyhow."

The old man took a good look at the Fresh and then he shook his head.

"You hev got me, stranger; you ain't the man I onc't knowed. He was a leetle taller than you be, I reckon, an' ef I remember right he had red ha'r and a beard—a red beard, not a very big beard, but jest a leetle kind of a scrubby growth, like as ef the sile wa'n't hull-some."

"Was he from Mohave City?" the Fresh demanded, bold as brass.

"Wa-al, now, stranger, I reckon that you hev got me foul ag'in," the old man answered. "Darned ef I remember whar he was from. It was up that way, somewhar."

"I've got a cousin, same name as mine, and he comes pretty close to the description you give, but I never heerd tell on him down in this country, though, maybe, he might have floated out this way; thar's no telling."

The proprietor of the saloon had listened to this altercation with ill-concealed disgust, not unmixed with a little anxiety. A "leetle" difficulty in his place was about the last thing he wanted to see, for he understood well enough that his personal property would suffer in case of a free fight. Besides, here was a man ready to set up the drinks for the crowd, so he hastened to pour the oil of peace upon the troubled waters.

"Come, nominate your p'ison, gen'lmen!" he exclaimed, whisky-bottle in hand. It was rather an unnecessary remark, for there wasn't much choice to be had; the crowd might call for what they liked, but good old tanglefoot, death-at-forty-roads whisky was all they were likely to get. "I reckon it is all right; 'pears to me I have seen this hyer gen'lman up at Mohave City a right smart heap of times."

"Certainly! Why, no doubt you have heard my name called often!"

"I reckon I have, for sure!" and then, as the speediest way to stop the discussion the man of liquors commenced to let the potent whisky gurgle into the glasses. He knew his men pretty well and guessed they would not be able to resist the temptation of free drinks.

"Come, boys, hyer we go!" cried the Californian, seizing upon a glass and holding it up on high. The others were not slow to follow his example.

"Here's luck to trade and down she goes!" he continued, tossing the fiery liquor down his throat just as if it was only so much water.

"Down she goes," repeated the rest, and then, with much smacking of lips, the liquor was disposed of and the fugitive breathed freely again.

"Fill 'em up again!" the Californian commanded, tossing a five-dollar gold piece upon the bar. "I'm flush to-night and it's my treat. I got paid off to-day."

Again the ardent fluid galloped down the thirsty throats of the gang.

"Hallo!" cried the Californian, pretending to listen; "thar is one of the boys shouting for me ow, I reckon. Well, so-long, boys; I will see you again!"

He turned to depart, secretly worried at having lost so much valuable time, but still thinking he had ample margin left to get out of town before his escape should be discovered; but the fugitive was like a man wandering in a maze—no sooner did he surmount one obstacle than another rose before him.

As he turned to depart the door of the saloon opened suddenly and a tall, raw-boned, red-haired man, whose lantern jaws were covered with a scrubby red beard, and whose head was bare, came rushing into the room, a cocked revolver in his hand.

The instant he beheld the Fresh he halted and leveled the revolver full at his breast.

"You durned scallywag, I hev corraled you at last!" he cried, in savage tones.

It required no prophet to tell the Californian that the irate stranger was the owner of the hat and poncho, Jim Yards of Mohave City.

CHAPTER XX.

MORE TROUBLE.

APPARENTLY the Californian was caught at a terrible disadvantage, for the new-comer's revolver was cocked and pointed directly at his breast, and that the man meant mischief, too, was plainly apparent from the glare in his eye, and the ugly look upon his extremely unprepossessing face.

Although the fellow's appearance was entirely unexpected, yet the Fresh easily comprehended how it had come about. The cool night air blowing upon his unprotected head had aroused him; then he had discovered the loss of his hat and poncho and had instantly set out to find the despoiler.

It would have been a deuced awkward predicament to be placed in at any time, but under the present circumstances, when his life depended upon his getting out of the town as quickly as possible, California John came to the conclusion that it was about as tight a pinch as he had experienced. There was no other course open to him, though, but to put a bold face upon the matter and brazen it out. The bluff game was the only one in such a case, while, really, he was not so much at the other's mercy as appearances indicated.

Under the poncho his left hand grasped a cocked revolver.

"Hold on, hold on! Who be you talking to?" the Fresh demanded, his tone as high and his manner as rough as his assailant's.

For a moment the new-comer seemed dumb with astonishment. Here was the man who had stripped him of his hat and blanket "talking back" to him with the stolen articles on his person!

"See hyer, gen'lmen, if this hyer don't beat anything I ever heerd tell on or see'd! Thar's that galoot has got on my hat and blanket, and he wants to know who I am a-talking to! Blame me! if I ain't got a good mind to drill a hole right through you, you ornery, low-lived cuss!"

"Your hat and blanket!" cried the Fresh, in utter scorn. "Well, hang me! if your cheek don't beat my time! Where would I get your hat and blanket, you slabsided, hatchet faced galoot? You are either drunk or crazy, man! Why, I bought and paid for both of them, in good, hard, solid cash, and the poncho's got my name on it, too—Jim Yards, of Mohave City!"

The man's face at this announcement was a sight. The boldness of the assertion fairly took his breath away, and for a moment he could only gasp in astonishment.

"Your name, Jim Yards!" he cried, at last, hardly able to speak for his rage.

"That's my handle!" replied the Californian, promptly and arrogantly, and he took advantage of the other's astonishment to slip his right hand under the poncho and draw the other revolver from its holster.

"Waal, if you are Jim Yards, who in thunder be I?" the man demanded.

"How should I know who you are? but, from the way you are going on I reckon you are either drunk or crazy," and then with a sudden motion he drew his left hand from under the poncho, and stepping forward shoved the muzzle of the revolver which it grasped right under the nose of the other. "Uncock that pistol and put it back in your belt or I'll blow the whole top of your head off!" he commanded.

And the mule-driver, cowed by the sudden and unexpected action, obeyed the injunction, but he blurted out a remonstrance.

"Look a-hyer, gen'lmen, if this hyer ain't rough! I laid down to sleep with that air hat and poncho on 'bout two hours ago, heving h'isted a leetle more fire-water than I could carry, and when I woke up both hat and blanket were gone. This cuss hyer come along and stole 'em when I was asleep, and now he talks 'bout blowing the bull top of my head off. I'm Jim Yards, I am, and he's a liar when he says that's his name!"

"I know that this yere man is Jim Yards," croaked the little old codger, who had before remarked that he was acquainted with a man of that name. "Didn't I tell you that he had red ha'r?"

"I said that he was a liar in the first place!" the chief of the party cried. "An' I reckon that he did steal them things. I move that we whale him, boys!"

Out flashed the other revolver, and its threatening muzzle prevented any hostile demonstration.

"Ta, ta, gentlemen! You will really have to excuse me," the Californian remarked, as he waved the real Jim Yards away from the door with the other revolver. "Sorry that I can't stay longer, but the best of friends must part. I'll see you all again later, but if any of you are anxious to have a funeral in the town, and want a chance to ride in the first carriage, you had better follow me, and a finer opportunity you won't get this side of Christmas."

And the Fresh slid out through the door.

As long as the Californian was in the saloon the sight of his drawn revolvers and a certain something in his manner repressed the ardor of

the party, but now they were freed from his presence every voice was for war.

Revolvers were flourished and cocked, and with many an angry oath they assured the despoiled mule-driver who had been robbed, not only of his hat and blanket but his very name, that he should be amply avenged.

Then, feeling pretty sure that the bold marauder had got something of a start, they rushed out into the street.

The worst of bad luck seemed to be taking a malicious pleasure in throwing all sorts of obstacles in the fugitive's path that night, for in hurrying out of the saloon, the Fresh ran full tilt into another party of drunken men, who were making night hideous with their howls, and they, just drunk enough to be quarrelsome, took it upon themselves to believe the newcomer had run into them on purpose to pick a quarrel, and so at once proceeded to pitch into him.

"Keep off, keep off, or you are dead men!" he cried, retreating from the assault, and endeavoring to escape from them.

But the drunken men, valiant with bad whisky, were bent upon a fight, and so at last, in sheer self-defense, to save himself from being mauled by the ruffians, he fired, taking care, however, to elevate his weapon so as not to wound the "infernal idiots," as he mentally termed them.

But he had to deal with men whose brains were fired to madness by the fumes of bad liquor, and as none of the party were injured by the shot, they commenced to close in on him, and he saw that he must either disable his assailants or be overcome himself.

Again he fired—two shots this time, and each bullet brought down a man.

The men, somewhat sobered by this, began to retreat, while the Californian, anxious to be effectually rid of them, dashed after the crowd, firing rapidly, as if he meant to annihilate the whole party.

This ruse was successful; the fellows ran at the top of their speed, yelling wildly.

"Now, then, I will make tracks in the other direction!" the Fresh decided, but, as he did so, the mule-drivers came rushing out of the saloon, and the moment they perceived him they opened fire.

There was as much noise and confusion as though a band of red-skins had attacked the town.

The inhabitants came rushing from every house, half-dressed, equipped with all sorts of weapons.

First in the street were Keno Bill and his satellites. Despite the Californian's disguise, the keen eyes of Alcibiades recognized him instantly, and shouted for the citizens to assist him in securing the fugitive. Things looked black for bold California John just then.

CHAPTER XXI.

ANOTHER LEETLE GAME.

THE whole town was in an uproar; never had Needle Bar witnessed such a scene of confusion. The street was literally alive with people, and thus for the fugitive was escape cut off. Turn which way he would the Fresh saw nothing but hostile faces and brandished arms.

"Don't shoot, boys, don't shoot!" Keno Bill cried, loudly; "for if you happen to hit him you will spoil all the fun of the hanging!"

Advice which all were quite willing to accept. A good hanging was just the thing for Needle Bar, seeing that it had not yet enjoyed that honor.

The fugitive still had six shots in his pistols, and as he faced the encompassing throng, the desperate thought came into his head to make a rush and break through the line; but the chances were a hundred to one that he would perish in the attempt. No; better surrender and trust again to luck. So he let down the hammers of his revolvers and cried out that he surrendered.

The face of Alcibiades was dark and troubled as he walked up to the Californian.

"Why, you are a regular Jack Sheppard!" he exclaimed. "Can't we hold you a prisoner, anyway?"

"Well, you ought not to complain; you have been as lucky in recapturing me as I have been in escaping."

At this moment the mule-driver came up and claimed his hat and poncho.

"Take them and be hanged to you!" and the sport, divesting himself of the articles, threw them at the man. "If it hadn't have been for your infernal name stuck on your blanket I would have been safe out of this town long ago!"

"Serves you right!" retorted the man. "You will know enough, I reckon, to let other people's things alone next time."

The fugitive was reconducted by Alcibiades back to the prison-room. On the way Keno Bill was curious about the secret of his escape, but John would not satisfy his curiosity.

"Oh, I walked out," was all the explanation that he would vouchsafe.

And when they arrived at the saloon the astonishment of both pair of guards was only equaled by the profound amazement of Hairpin,

whom they were obliged to arouse from an unusually heavy sleep.

The jailer had taken care to replace the board in the floor, and only careful scrutiny could have discovered that avenue of escape.

Bill and the captain were completely puzzled. Never once did they think of looking at the floor, and so the manner of the escape remained a mystery, but Bill had his suspicions of the jailer, so he announced that he would watch the prisoner himself until daylight. Moved by this convincing proof of Bill's devotion to the common weal, the captain declared that he would keep Alcibiades company.

Hairpin departed; Bill brought in a fresh supply of candles, and the watch began.

Not one of those within the room had any idea of sleep, and Keno Bill, noticing the pack of cards which were still upon the table, remarked:

"Looks as if you had been enjoying yourselves."

"Yes, we had a little friendly game of poker to pass the time away. How would you two gentlemen like to have a game?" the prisoner inquired. "I don't feel much like sleep with this circus before me to-morrow. I succeeded in skinning the sheriff; in fact, after cleaning him out of his money, I won every rag that he had on him, even to his boots; but perhaps, though, as luck is running pretty strong with me to-night at cards, it wouldn't be safe for you to play."

A banter which excited Alcibiades more than an open defiance, as the Fresh had calculated.

"Wa-al, I am generally pretty lucky myself," the Keno King replied. "What do you say, Cap, to a leetle game to pass the time away?"

"Tain't jest 'cording to Hoyle, is it, for the judge and the prosecuting attorney to play keards with a convicted prisoner?" suggested the old store-keeper.

"No more is it 'cording to rule for you and me to be hyer a-watching on him, hey?"

"That's so."

"Just as you like, gentlemen, you know," the Fresh remarked. "I give you fair warning that the odds are about ten to one that I shall skin you if you play, for my 'medicine' is powerful good to-night, as the sheriff found out to his sorrow."

"Cap'n, we will really have to take a leetle of the conceit out of this chap, or else there won't be any standing of him until daybreak!" Bill exclaimed.

"Jest as you say; I play once in a while," the captain admitted.

So the three sat down to play, and an exciting and interesting game they had.

Keno Bill was thought to be an adept at all games of chance, but as for the captain, his knowledge in that line was not generally known, but before three hands had been played, to the astonishment of both the Californian and Alcibiades, they discovered that the old store-keeper was a perfect adept.

Of course all cheated, more or less; among such sharps that was to be expected, and this was where the Fresh had the "pull" on his companions; neither of the others could handle the cards with his dexterity. From the start, therefore, the prisoner was a winner, and the end of the first hour he had accumulated quite a pile of money on his side of the table, Alcibiades losing much more heavily than the captain, who played an extremely safe game.

Bill, growing decidedly annoyed at the scientific way in which the Fresh was skinning him, at last forgot his caution and played recklessly, anticipating that some lucky stroke would recoup him for his losses.

But the Californian was a very king of card-players; no matter how the game was going, whether he was losing or winning, he was still the same careless, jovial soul; success did not elate, nor ill-fortune depress him. His head was always clear, his blood always cool. No man who yields to passion can hope to play cards successfully.

At the end of the second hour Alcibiades went for the big "pot" with a capital hand, three aces, and the prisoner flaxed him with four seven spots. In a rage, and with a bitter oath, Bill threw down his cards.

"I'll play no more!" he cried; "I'm broke!"

Just then Hairpin came rushing into the room, trembling with excitement.

CHAPTER XXII.

A TUMULT.

"HEY, gents!" the mule skinner yelled; "durn my gizzard if thar ain't blazes and all to pay outside!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Alcibiades, jumping to his feet, as the prisoner, paying no attention to what the excited man had to say, proceeded to "scoop" the wealth he had won into his pockets.

"Blazes has broke loose, for sure!" Hairpin declared, and on the air rose a loud and seemingly angry hum outside, which indicated that there was a gathering of people in the street.

"Spit it out, you durned fool; what is it?" Bill cried, in a rage. "Are they going to try

to rescue this hyer man?" and, as he spoke, he drew a revolver from his belt.

"Rescue! blazes! No, they want to hang him!"

"To hang him?" both the captain and Bill exclaimed in a breath.

And the Californian, who had just stowed away the last of the spoils in his pocket, looked up with a placid smile.

"Going to hang me, eh? Well, now, this is getting interesting. But, what are they in such a deuce of a hurry for? If they will only hold their horses my esteemed friends hyer will save them the trouble."

"Oh, they air jest a-tearing out thar, I tell you!" the mule-skinner persisted. "They air going to have this hyer man or else they air going to tear this old shanty all to pieces!"

"The blazes they are!" growled Bill. "I reckon I will have a word to say about that before they get through."

"They mean business, Bill!" asserted the sheriff, "and I want to warn you, as a real, old, solid friend, that the odds are big; you will get hurt if you try to fool with this hyer convention. They air ugly, Bill, you kin bet on it!"

"But, what started it, and who is bossing the machine?"

"That durned red skin, Charley Yampas, is doing 'bout as much talk as any one of the gang. You see, this hyer sport plugged two or three of the boys pretty bad in that leetle skirmish, and they and their friends are anxious to get square, so I reckon that started the muck; then that durned old Hunchback, Hiko, he has been chinning pretty lively, saying as how he kin hang this hyer sport as well as any man living, and not half try, either; and not only that, but he could put him in a hole in the 'arh, head down, arterwards. You see, Bill, that kinder tickled the crowd, and they kinder come to the conclusion that as long as the roan was going to be hung, he might as well be strung up first as last, an' planted in new style."

"Not much are they going to take him to-night. I reckon I will have a few words to say about that matter. We will see, and mighty soon too, who is going to run this town."

"If there is going to be a fight, pardner," interrupted the prisoner, "all I ask is that you will give me a chance to see the fun. As things look now I ain't got very long to live and I want to enjoy myself all I can."

At this moment the two sentinels who had been posted at the back door came rushing into the room in a hurry.

"Look a-hyer, Bill!" the first one cried, "thar's going to be trouble if you don't speak to this hyer crowd outside—they are just tearing mad!"

Hardly were the words out of the man's mouth when into the room came one of the two men who had been posted in the saloon.

"Say, Bill, them fellers are trying to bust the front door in. My pard is a-talkin' sweet to them, but I'm afraid they won't take no taffy, and they are a-threatening to cave his head in if he don't open the door."

Then there was a crash, followed by a yell outside; the mob had forced in the front door of the saloon.

"Two of you stay hyer with the prisoner!" Alcibiades ordered. "If he attempts escape kill him on the spot! The rest follow me! If this gang want blood they shall have it!" And with a cocked revolver in each hand Bill dashed into the saloon, followed by all, excepting the prisoner and his two guards.

The keno room was lighted by a single hanging coal-oil lamp; this and the moonlight streaming in at the side windows afforded ample illumination.

The crowd had now commenced to pour in at the front door which they had forced, and the single sentry was retreating before them, but when Keno Bill came dashing into the saloon, it put a new face on affairs; the Keno King meant "business," and the rioters fell back, retreating through the front door in a hurry.

But when Alcibiades reached the front door he realized that if the crowd were really in earnest his resistance would be futile.

"Wa-al, gen'lemen, what does all this mean, anyway?" he demanded, at the top of his voice.

"We want that air sharp to hang him—the man wot stole my hat and blanket, and he got two bullet-holes in the poncho too, so that it ain't worth a durn for a tent now!" yelled the foremost man in the crowd, easily recognized as the mule driver.

"He will be hung in the morning; why can't you let matters take their course?" the old store-keeper questioned.

"He has draw'd much blood to-night, and he ought to be strung right up now!" cried another one of the multitude. "Durn me ef he didn't come within an ace of plugging me for good! As it is, he put a mark on my arm that I won't get rid of for a month of Sundays, so up with him, I say, and the quicker the better!"

Some of the crowd were on horseback, and among them Charley Yampas and Hiko, the Hunchback, who, it was plain, were urging on the rest—the Hunchback brandishing a coil of rope in the air that he carried on his arm.

Bill had been at a loss to guess why these

two, who had no grudge against the prisoner, should busy themselves in the matter at all; but now he began to see the reason: Yampas was jealous that he, Bill, should have been chosen to run the machine, being a rival saloon-keeper, and he had taken advantage of the tumult to assume the leadership of the crowd, and he had probably hired the Hunchback to assist him in carrying out his purpose.

Alcibiades set his teeth firmly together for a moment; to surrender his prey to Charley Yampas was repugnant to him, but when he looked upon the angry faces of the crowd and saw how determined they were, he was wise enough to understand that he was only bringing destruction upon his own head by attempting to dispute the will of the enraged people, and so, with as good a grace as possible, he yielded.

"Gentlemen, is it your will to take this man and hang him now?" he asked.

"Yes, yes!" came the answer in one great roar from the crowd.

"All right! He's your mutton; I surrender him. The will of the majority prevails in this town!"—a declaration greeted with a wild huzza!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE RIDE TO DEATH.

ALCIBIADES yielding, the half-breed, the master of the Silver Hell, came to the front.

"Gentlemen, he announced, "we want to put this thing right through at express speed, and without any bungling over it, either. I move that we mount the prisoner upon a horse, put the rope around his neck and trot him off at once to the first cottonwood. What do you say?"

The answer was a loud yell of approval. They fairly hungered for the blood of the victim.

"Hiko, here, has filled many a grave in his time, and has served as a hangman more than once," Charley Yampas continued.

Over the hard face of the Hunchback came a grin, and he nodded his head significantly. "I'll do the job up brown, and if I don't you can string me up, too!"

"That's the kind of talk to suit!" cried a stalwart fellow in the crowd, and the rest at once shouted out their approval.

"We must get him a horse, somewhere," the half-breed remarked.

"Let him take my beast!" Hiko volunteered.

"Oh, no, you are one of the chief men in the procession; it won't do to have you walk," Yampas replied.

Another horseman at once volunteered his steed. This man was Yampas's master of ceremonies in the Silver Hell, considerable of a sport, and the bay mare he owned was reputed to be the crack horse of the town; anyway, she had so far beaten everything that had ventured to enter the lists against her.

"Good for you, Pete!" Hiko cried. "Your mare will do, and the man will have the satisfaction of knowing that he rides to his death well-mounted."

"Shall I bring him out?" Alcibiades asked.

"If you will be so kind," Yampas replied, politely, and the crowd at once took up the cry.

"Yes, yes, trot him out; we're in a hurry!"

"Maybe we won't be in a hurry when our time comes," the Hunchback remarked. This odd piece of humanity was noted for saying unpleasant things.

Bill retraced his steps through the saloon, and when he entered the room where the prisoner was confined he found that the Californian had improved the opportunity to inveigle the two guards into a little game.

When he reentered the first round was finished, and the prisoner, with his white and sinewy hand, was just raking in the spoils, much to the disgust of his opponents.

"Sorry to interrupt you, but that's a leetle business on hand that will, probably, take up your attention for the next half hour," the Keno King remarked, with a grim smile.

"Yes? Well, boys, you will have to excuse me then," and the prisoner gathered up the money and put it into his pockets. "I will give you your revenge at some other time."

"It will have to be in the other world, then," Bill remarked, "for if the fellows outside carry out the programme they have marked out you won't have any chance in this one."

"What is the trouble?" the Californian inquired, apparently not in the least disconcerted.

"They are going to hang you," Bill answered.

"Dear me! Is that possible? Well, do you know a great many smart men, in whose judgment I have every confidence, have always predicted that I would be hung some day, and perhaps my time has come." He arose with as much coolness as though going out for a pleasure excursion.

A great stillness fell upon the turbulent crowd when the prisoner appeared at the front door of the saloon, closely followed by Keno Bill and the guards.

"Gentlemen, I am your humble servant to command," the Fresh remarked, waving his hand, patronizingly, to the throng. "I don't want to appear in the light of interfering in other people's business, yet as I have a slight interest in this leetle affair, will you allow me to suggest that I don't really see the necessity of your being in such a dence of a hurry? Why won't to-morrow do as well as to-night? and, just think, a lot of people are calculating upon seeing this performance who live out of town and will most certainly miss the show if you insist on hurrying things this way."

As one man the crowd drew a long breath and looked wonderingly in each other's faces; such an exhibition of pluck and coolness Needle Bar never before had witnessed.

"Prisoner, you have been condemned to death after a fair trial, and this hyer crowd thinks that the sooner you are out of the way the better. You are a mighty dangerous man. It wasn't your fault that you didn't kill half a dozen of our citizens. A man like you in this hyer town would be mighty apt to depopulate it after awhile unless some fresh pilgrims came in."

It was Charley Yampas who spoke, and although the Fresh seemed indifferent, yet in reality he was much astonished to find that this once seeming friend should now be at the head of the men thirsting for his blood. This was a riddle and no mistake.

"Hyers your horse. Mount, stranger, for your last ride!" the Hunchback exclaimed, in his loud, hoarse voice, which rung out harsh and discordant.

"Hunchbacks are good luck for me," the Fresh murmured, as he looked upon the misshapen man. "I met three hunchbacks, one after the other, the night I broke the faro-bank in Frisco and won twenty thousand dollars. Are hunchbacks good luck in Frisco and bad in Arizona?"

"Come, stranger, mount and we'll git; the boys are anxious for the fandango!" Yampas cried.

Just a single look the prisoner swept over the crowd, and for a moment the wild thought of attempting a dash for liberty entered his head, but he saw no friendly faces; all looked upon him angrily; a mob once started is like a tiger; it seeks to destroy; and force, not reason, is the only thing that can turn it from its purpose.

"All right, gentlemen," the sport assented, still cheerful and calm, although the prospect ahead did seem to be terribly dark. "It is never agreeable to go against the will of the majority, so I'm your antelope."

With a light spring the prisoner leaped into the saddle, and as he settled himself in his seat and felt the mouth of the animal with the bit, his sporting instincts told him that he had seldom backed a better steed.

"Oh, if I could only break through this crowd I would risk their pistols," was his thought.

But those who had him in charge were not disposed to give him a single chance of escaping. Charley Yampas, a cocked revolver in hand, took his position on one side and Hiko, the Hunchback, on the other, and for further precaution Hiko made a noose in the rope which he carried and placed it around the neck of the doomed man, drawing it quite tight and retaining the end of the rope in his hands.

Alcibiades had watched the proceedings with a careful eye. He had made up his mind to interfere unless he saw that every possible precaution was being taken against the prisoner's escape. But, as the matter had been arranged even his jealous mind could not cavil at anything.

The procession started; straight toward the bank of the river it went, and then when the yellow, muddy waters of the Colorado were reached the northern trail was taken. About a mile on a couple of good big cottonwood trees grew by the side of the stream, and from the larger of the two a branch projected that was just the thing for the dread purpose. Once there Yampas called for a volunteer, and a little wiry fellow climbed up into the tree and fastened the end of the rope to the limb.

The idea was to drive the horse from under the man and leave him suspended.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MANY A SLIP, ETC.

THE procession had proceeded at a walk all the way; the horsemen with the prisoner in the center, completely encircled by the crowd, and each and every man in the throng with a weapon was ready to open fire on the prisoner if he should attempt escape, but when the preparations for the final scene were complete the multitude forgot its vigilance in the horrible interest of the coming tragedy.

"Better tie his hands," Alcibiades suggested.

"Yes, that would be a good idea!" Yampas assented. "Who has a piece of cord fit for such a job?"

"I have," and the Hunchback produced from his pocket a stout string, which he held up in the moonlight and with both hands tested its strength.

"Decidedly I believe that Hunchbacks in Arizona are bad luck for me!" the Fresh muttered, as he beheld this operation.

"Hold on a moment!" now interposed the store-keeper. "Ain't we going it a leetle too fast, boys? Wouldn't it be a good idea to try and get this man to confess his share in the bloody deed and to own up who his confederates are?"

The words of Judge Lynch were timely and all agreed that the suggestion was a good one.

"Put it to him, judge; you kin do the speechifying."

"You hear, prisoner?"

"Oh, yes, I hear."

"Well, what do you say?"

"I hav'n't anything to say."

"Don't you understand the offer?"

"What offer? I hav'n't heard any yet?"

"Why, I reckon that it is the sentiment of this hyer community if you make a clean breast of this affair and tell all you know about it that they will see what they can do for you."

"What they can do for me?" and a contemptuous smile curled the lip of the prisoner. "That is a very indefinite expression, and may mean much or little. Suppose I do tell all I know, will I be released and allowed to go on my way unharmed?"

"I suppose you are willing to agree never to come back to this hyer town agin?" the captain asked.

The Fresh laughed outright.

"I could give that promise readily enough; Needle Bar has not made itself particularly attractive to me since I have sojourned in the town."

"Well, we will do what is right in the premises."

"If I make a full confession you will agree to let me go, free and unharmed?"

The captain looked at Alcibiades and the Keno King winked, significantly. The store-keeper understood that this meant he was to promise anything to induce the prisoner to confess, but the fulfillment of the promise, though, was quite another thing.

"Oh, yes, we'll do what is right; you kin depend upon that."

"And to do what is right will be to hang me, eh, after I have confessed?" cried the condemned man.

"Oh, well, if you ain't got any faith in us!" the captain exclaimed, attempting to assume an injured air.

"Not the least bit in the world, and you do not fool me for a cent! I feel perfectly sure that you do not intend to spare me; but, if you were to remove this rope from around my neck, give me back my arms, make me a present of this horse and allow me to go free on the sole condition that I should make a clean breast of all I know about the murder of which I stand accused, I could not say anything more to you than what I have said, and that is, I do not know anything about it. I am as innocent of the deed as though I had been a thousand miles away from here at the time the blow was struck! Now then, drive on with your funeral!"

"This fellow is clear grit, all the way through," the captain observed in an undertone to Keno Bill.

"Yes, he don't weaken for a cent."

"Have you got through speechifying?" Charley Yampas asked.

"Yes, and I ain't anxious to persuade the man to do what is right; if he is fool enough to throw his life away when there is a chance that he might be spared, why, it is his look-out and not mine; that is all I have got to say," the store-keeper replied.

The condemned man smiled contemptuously. The store-keeper could not save him even if he had the will; the men clustered around were eager for "the show," and a deuce of a row would have been kicked up if the hanging-match had been interfered with, unless indeed for very good cause.

"Go ahead then! Hiko, bind his hands, and, gentlemen, fall well back; we must give our friend hyer a good start for the other world," Yampas ordered.

The crowd fell back at once, while the Hunchback approached with the cord.

Hiko reined in his steed beside the bay mare, and then commenced to wind the cord around the prisoner's wrists, bending over in the saddle as he did so and taking particular pains to make a good job of it. As more than one man in the crowd observed, "The Hunchback is tying him for keeps."

But while the would be hangman was taking so much pains with the operation, he also delivered a communication to the captive, and performed this act so neatly, difficult as it was, that not a soul in the crowd had the least suspicion of it.

"I am about to say something to you," he murmured. "When your wrists are bound after I leave you, clutch the horn of the saddle with your hands, but do it carelessly as if you were merely resting your hands upon it." The saddle upon which the prisoner was seated was a Mexican one, built after the fashion peculiar to that country, with a long horn in the front. "In the holsters are a pair of loaded revolvers."

When the horse is started, brace yourself for a shock and hold on for dear life, and if you succeed in escaping don't forget the man to whom you owe your life. Remember the place of meeting up the river and make there as soon as you can, but only by night."

The mystery was now unraveled; the mob had been excited to action for the express purpose of giving him a chance to escape!

"There you are now!" cried the Hunchback, in a loud voice, as he finished his work, and again sat upright in the saddle. "All ready for your trip to another world; and I reckon, too, that you are as well-mounted for the ride as any man can be, for a better horse than that bay mare never stepped on iron."

"And I won't forget it!" observed the prisoner, jocosely. "Well, so long, gentlemen; I will try and have things ready for you in the other world. I'll tell the chief cook to keep a particularly warm corner for any of the boys from Needle Bar."

CHAPTER XXV.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

"READY?" asked Yampas.

"All ready!" the Hunchback replied.

"Anything to say, judge?" and the half-breed raised the long mule-whip with its cruel lash high in the air.

"It is your last chance, prisoner, to confess!" the captain exclaimed, willing to fool the doomed man even when his foot was on the threshold of eternity.

"I have nothing to confess; my soul is free from any stain of crime in Needle Bar, although maybe, I wouldn't be able to make so good a boast about some other places," the Californian replied, frankly.

"Mebbe the man would like to say a prayer or two," suggested an old white-headed miner in the throng, "or, mebbe, send a few words to the folks at home who will be apt to wonder what has become of him."

For the first time a slight shade appeared upon the open countenance of the Fresh.

"I am much obliged, my friend," he answered, "but I am no craven hound to fly to prayer at the last extremity, and as for friends, there are few in this world who will care to know whether California John is alive or dead. So you see, under these circumstances, I have no use for either prayers or messages, thanking you all the same for your kindly thought, pardner."

"Since you won't confess, your doom be on your own head!" Alcibiades cried. "Go ahead, Yampas, and, California John, may Heaven have mercy on your soul!"

"You black-hearted scoundrel, do you think your words will have any weight at the judgment-seat?" the Fresh cried, indignantly.

"Start 'em, Yampas!" Keno Bill yelled, snarling under the taunt.

"Get up!" and down with a heavy crack came the terrible whip upon the flank of the bay mare.

Terrified by the sting of the lash, unaccustomed to such treatment, the mare sprung forward like an arrow from the bow, and if the captive had not been previously warned he must surely have been unseated, but the Californian, well prepared, clung to the horn of the saddle; the rope tightened; and, as with bated breath the crowd watched the startling sight expecting to see the rider writhing at the end of the cord. Judge of the surprise when the stout rope snapped under the strain about three feet above the head of the Californian, and away on the back of the steed at a break-neck pace went the man, whom Needle Bar had doomed to death!

"The rope was rotten!" was the general cry.

"Curse it, Hiko, whar did you get that rope?" Yampas cried.

"From the captain's store!" replied the Hunchback, turning indignantly upon the old store-keeper. "I paid five dollars for the coil and it ought to have been strong enough to have hung an elephant."

"You can't always tell, gentlemen," stammered the store-keeper; "dry rot gets in and you can't tell without trying, but I will make it good."

The position of Judge Lynch was decidedly unpleasant, for the crowd were cursing him up hill and down, as the saying is, for "spoiling the fun with his durned old rotten rope!"

But the wildest man of them all was Alcibiades, for a sudden suspicion had crept into his mind that there was something wrong about the matter, although he didn't exactly understand how the trick had been worked. If there was a plot, either Hiko or Charley Yampas was concerned in it, although for the life of him he couldn't comprehend why either of them should want to aid the stranger, but there might be some powerful motive for it, after all.

"Don't let us stand chattering hyer like a pack of fools!" he exclaimed, angrily, "but give chase at once. Lend me a hoss, some of you mounted fellows!"

"Come on, boys!" yelled Yampas, and away the horsemen started in pursuit, with the exception of one rather timid miner, who, as it happened, was mounted upon the best animal

in the town—the bay mare that the fugitive bestrode excepted.

"Hyer, take my hoss, Bill!" he cried, dismounting. "I ain't worth shucks at shooting, anyway, and couldn't do nothin' if I did catch up with him."

Alcibiades swung himself at once into the saddle and set off in pursuit. Thanks to the speed of his horse he soon caught up with the rest of the pursuers.

"Mighty small chance of ketching him, I reckon," one of the horsemen observed, after they had ridden on in silence for a few minutes.

The fugitive was in plain sight, but gaining gradually upon the townsmen. He had got his hands free and had removed the rope from around his neck!

"I am afraid that he has got the foot of us," Yampas remarked. "I never knew anything in town to beat that mare."

"She has only been tried on a quarter stretch, and no one knows whether she has got the bottom for a long run or not," Alcibiades replied.

"Ef we could ketch up to him, we'd fix him mighty quick, and without troubling Judge Lynch or a rope to take a hand in the fun," one of the other horsemen said, flourishing his revolver.

"Yes, unarmed he would fall an easy prey, and we could make short work of him," Charley Yampas remarked. "And that reminds me that I had better see if my tools are in order for action."

He thrust his hands into the holsters of the saddle, and then a sharp and bitter oath escaped from his lips.

"Curse the luck!" he cried; "the pistols are not here; that fool of a negro has changed the saddles! That fellow there has got my revolvers!" and he pointed toward the sharp, riding for his life.

A perfect torrent of curses at this unexpected piece of ill-luck came from the mouths of the horsemen when they learned this news. There were only six of them all told, and if the Californian was in possession of two revolvers, even if he was overtaken, it was no sure thing that they would be able to subdue him.

Alcibiades alone was silent; the suspicion which had first entered his mind at the time of the prisoner's escape was strengthened by this discovery. The Californian owed his escape not to accident but to design. There had been a deep-laid plot, and the chances seemed strong that both Charley Yampas and the Hunchback were mixed up in it. But, plot or no plot, the escape seemed certain, for the sport was drawing gradually ahead, while the horses of the pursuers were beginning to show signs that the pace was too severe for them.

"My nag's about gone; ten minutes more of this kind of work will use him up," Hiko declared.

"I guess we might as well give it up and call it half a day," Yampas observed. "That bay mare has got bottom as well as speed and nary chance do we stand of catching her."

But the race is not always to the swift nor the battle to the strong, and in this case it happened that just as the pursuers slackened rein, and the Fresh, turning in the saddle in order to watch his pursuers, perceived the movement and murmured allowed that the danger was past, the trusty bay mare put one of her front feet into a hole, stumbled—came down upon her knees, and the violence of the shock threw the rider over her head as though he had been shot out of a bomb.

Down he came with terrible force upon the ground, stunned—completely senseless.

A yell came from the lips of the pursuers as they beheld this unexpected event and they spurred their jaded horses to fresh efforts, and he was still lying senseless when they reached his side. Alcibiades, dismounting quickly examined him.

"He is alive, all right!" he exclaimed. "And now, gentlemen, this man is mine! We will have no more mob-law but we will have him regularly hung to-morrow morning just as it was originally intended, and I will take care that there won't be any rotten rope business this time."

An hour later the Fresh woke to consciousness back in his old quarters!

CHAPTER XXVI.

NO BLUNDER THIS TIME.

No such exciting events as had occurred during the last few hours had ever transpired at The Bar and great was the talk occasioned.

The execution had been set at twelve, high noon, and the cottonwood tree which had done duty for a gallows before was selected.

Keno Bill having confided to the old store-keeper his suspicions in regard to the Californian's escape, the two had laid their heads together to make further escape impossible.

"The fourth time may be the charm, you know," Alcibiades had observed; "and the fellow may yet succeed in slipping through our fingers. Three times he has tried it on, and every time, just by accident alone, he has been

retaken. Now, if he gets another chance he may really off, and then laugh at us."

The captain was armed on this point, and all possible precautions were taken.

Keno Bill got together a force of twelve men upon whom he thought he could rely; four of them were put in the room with the prisoner, guarding him, and the rest kept watch and ward without.

Bill himself never took a wink of sleep during the time that intervened between the recapture and the hour set for the execution.

The prisoner, on the contrary, after he had recovered from the effect of the severe fall from the horse, laid himself out upon one of the buffalo-ropes and slept as soundly as a child, untroubled by a single care.

One chance only of escape seemed left, and that was through the aid of the girl, and in one respect a portion of that scheme was already defeated. He calculated and weighed all the chances as coolly as if he was but an indifferent looker-on and it was not his own life which was at stake. Perhaps, too, the unknown friends who had twice come to his assistance might devise a third plan, since fortune had frowned upon the first two in the moment when success seemed assured.

As the hour drew nigh the inhabitants of the town turned out as one man to witness the sight, and Keno Bill swore by all that was great that the crowd should not be cheated of their fun this time. With his own hands he chose the rope, and he took good care to have the article tested, to provide against a second "accident."

He had had a long conversation with the Doctor about the hanging, and finally consented to have him act as hangman, assuring him that the "circus" should be conducted exactly as he suggested.

"Do the thing up in a ship-shape manner," was the Doctor's idea. "Have a man at the head of the horse, and another man with a loaded rifle ready; and when I give the signal let the man fire the rifle as a signal for the other to start the horse."

"All right; fix it anyway you like. The only thing is to hang the man so that he will stay hanged; that is all I want."

The Doctor assured the Keno King that after he had adjusted the hempen cravat nothing short of a miracle would save this dare-devil sport.

The hour of twelve drew nigh. Keno Bill thought it never would come, so anxious was he to have the affair off his mind, but to the Californian, on the contrary, the minutes seemed to fly with lightning-like speed.

"Will there be a chance for me?" he had murmured to himself a half a dozen times. "If I only had a revolver, and the girl is true to her word, there might be. It would be a desperate risk, but I have faced as desperate ones in my time and lived to tell of it."

If there had been only one or two guards in the room he might have corrupted them, for gladly would he have given all the money which he had in his pocket for a weapon, and it was a pretty large sum, for to his plunder he had added the spoils wrested from the big mule-driver, from Alcibiades, the captain and the guards, and the sum which he had won from Keno Bill alone was no trifle.

But four men could not be easily bought, since each would fear that the other would betray the bargain.

Even the poor consolation of "spoiling the Egyptians" at poker was denied him, for Alcibiades had given strict orders that card-playing must not be permitted.

The sun was high in the heavens; all the people of the town, as well as a great number from the neighboring places, who had heard of the affair, were in the street, and at just a quarter to twelve Alcibiades sent word to bring the prisoner out.

Five minutes later the procession started, Alcibiades and the old store-keeper at the head, then the twelve guards with cocked revolvers with orders to shoot the captive if he tried to escape, or if there were any signs of an attempt to rescue him by force. In the rear came the Doctor, carrying the rope, and the citizens at large surrounded the cortege on all sides.

John's first look when he came from his prison-house was for the girl, but she was nowhere to be seen.

"She may be up along the river waiting for a good opportunity," he concluded, but, despite this reasoning he really felt depressed on account of her absence.

It was just twelve o'clock when the procession halted under the cottonwood, and as the Fresh looked up into its leafy branches the unpleasant conviction forced itself upon him that his chances of escaping from the rope this time were infinitely small.

"Mr. Alcibiades, I want this crowd to stand back. I cannot attend to my duties—my professional duties, with all these people crowding and gaping at me," the little Doctor exclaimed, with true professional dignity.

Keno Bill immediately directed the twelve guards to form a large semicircle extending from the river to the river again, so that the Doctor, his assistant, the prisoner and the steed,

a sorry little mule this time, in the center of the semicircle, were at least a hundred feet distant from the crowd.

The assistant shinned up the tree and tied the rope to a limb of the cottonwood, the very same limb from which the other rope still swung.

Again the Californian surveyed the crowd, looking for the girl, although even if she was on the spot with the fleet horse ready for the desperate attempt little good it could do him.

There were a few women present, for nearly all of the female inhabitants of the town were wild and savage by nature, fitted to take an interest in just such a tragic affair; but the one for whom he looked was not to be seen, and a half sigh escaped his lips; her absence pained him.

The rope being prepared the Doctor arranged the noose, and then approaching the prisoner, pulled from his pocket the black, bag-like cap of the hangman, and bidding the prisoner bow his head adjusted it, thus shutting out the sight of the world from the doomed man's eyes. The spectators observed this proceeding—which took considerable time, as the Doctor went to work in a very bungling manner—with a great deal of satisfaction, for they realized that they were going to get the worth of their money; this execution was going to be a first class affair and no mistake.

The cap was fitted to the Doctor's satisfaction at last, although the crowd could plainly see that the prisoner and the Doctor had had considerable talk about the matter, which was only natural under the circumstances, as no doubt the culprit would have preferred to be hung with his eyes open. Then the rope was adjusted around his neck.

The Doctor directed his assistant to take position at the head of the beast, and then motioned for the man with the rifle to step forward.

It had been arranged that when the Doctor brought his hands together up in the air the shot was to be fired.

One last look the little man took so as to be sure that all was correct, and then he gave the signal.

Crack! went the rifle, the shot ringing out clear and shrill.

The mule started, and the Californian, dragged from the back of the beast by the cruel rope, swung helplessly in mid air.

Keno Bill had triumphed over his foe at last!

CHAPTER XXVII.

MALICIOUS MISCHIEF.

THE hanging of the man whom the people of Needle Bar had so remorselessly hunted down, was not the only event destined to occur that day calculated to make the crowd gape with wonder.

Hardly had the report of the rifle died away, even while the blue smoke was still curling upward, and just as the doomed man swung clear of the back of the beast, a loud explosion echoed on the air, coming from the direction of the town, not a mile distant, and the crowd, in wonder, turning their eyes in that direction, beheld a bright tongue of flame shoot up in the air, followed by a dense smoke.

There had evidently been a terrific explosion, and as near as the people could make out, Alcibiades's place had suffered.

Then came a second explosion right on the heels of the first; flying pieces of boards rose on the air, and at the same time bright jets of flame could be seen spurting out from amid the smoke.

Of all things the inhabitants of a frontier town most dread the fire-tend. The buildings being constructed of wood, put up in the cheapest manner, are as ready to burn as so much tinder, when once a fire is started; if it is allowed to get under headway, the town is destroyed, for there is hardly any means of fighting a conflagration.

Therefore the crowd stood not upon the order of their going but went at once, each and every one racing homeward at breakneck speed.

The hanging was forgotten, although the interest in that might be said to be over, as the man had been fairly launched on his journey into the other world—the "circus" had performed.

The only man who bestowed a thought upon the condemned was Alcibiades, and he yelled to the Doctor as he started on a run toward the town:

"You stay and look after him, and I will make it all right with you!"

The Doctor nodded, and, jumping upon the back of the mule, rode up to where the suspended man hung swinging in the air.

Pell-mell, helter-skelter! No better time ever was made by any crowd than in this race for home. No one looked backward after the flight commenced, save Bill, who took a single flying glance just before he reached the edge of the town, to discover that the outlines of the hanging man no longer stood out bold against the sky.

"I reckon the Doc has cut him down so that he could go through him," Bill muttered, the remembrance of the "plunder" which the Cali-

fornian must have coming into his mind, and for the moment he regretted that he had not made the sharp disgorge the wealth which he had won from him at the poker-table.

As suspected, it was in Alcibiades's building the explosions had taken place, and by the time they reached the town all the rear part of the saloon, which had been torn to pieces by the explosion, was in flames.

With a will all set to work to extinguish the fire, which, if not speedily checked, would surely prove the destruction of the town.

Luckily no wind was blowing. If there had been a breeze, human hands could not have saved the town.

The fight for a time was a hard one, but at last the fire was subdued.

The explosion was a mystery, particularly as Keno Bill declared that to his knowledge there was nothing in the building of an explosive nature—no powder or glycerine.

With great care, then, the men proceeded to delve in the ruins, carefully removing the charred pieces of boards one by one; what they expected to find no one exactly knew, not even Alcibiades, who had proposed the operation.

When the floor was at last laid bare, there was plainly to be seen the marks where a can of powder had been placed, the firing of which by a fuse had blown the frail shanty asunder.

But who had done the deed, and what was the motive?

Keno Bill had enemies enough, of course; all men in public life must needs have them, particularly those whose lives ran in the groove that his did, but in reckoning them all over he could not pick out the one likely to do so bold a deed as this.

True, the town had been almost deserted; every one able to go being out to see the hanging, and the risk of detection was slight; yet, for all that, it took some nerve for any one in broad daylight to force in the door of a man's shanty and explode a can of powder right in the middle of the floor, for the deed of such a deed not only exposed himself to the vengeance of Keno Bill if he was discovered, but also to the rage of all the dwellers within the town, whose property was endangered by the outrage. The man who did the deed would be certainly hung with short shrift if he was identified.

Among the most attentive of the bystanders was the half-breed, Charley Yampas, and if Alcibiades had been called upon to name the man whom he thought likely to have perpetrated the deed, he would have named the half-breed. Judge, then, of Keno Bill's surprise, when Yampas's sharp eyes were the first to discover a clew.

"See!" he exclaimed, pointing to where a bit of red stuff just showed itself from under a piece of plank, "what is that? It's a piece of red stuff, from a man's shirt, maybe."

Alcibiades at once picked up the article.

No bit of flannel, but a little bow of ribbon with ornamented ends such as ladies wear at the throat!

A loud hum of surprise came from the bystanders, a number of whom recognized the bunch of ribbon, for they had seen it before—among them Keno Bill, and he was greatly affected.

The moving of the plank disclosed another object, which Yampas's keen eyes also detected.

"What is that little white thing down in the corner there?" he exclaimed; "looks like a small box."

Alcibiades picked it up, and many in the crowd recognized this article, too. It was a box of wax matches, each one of which would burn about a minute. No common article this in such a town as Needle Bar; therefore it was no wonder that those who had once seen it instantly recognized it again.

Yampas was the first to proclaim the ownership of the match-box, although every man in the group, who knew the facts in the case, had it on his tongue.

"Why, that box belonged to the man who was found dead in the street, and whose supposed murderer we hung to-day!" the half-breed exclaimed. "He lit his cigar with a match from that box in my saloon just before he went out to meet his death. I am quite sure of it, for I remarked that it was a handy thing to have around, and he tendered me a match to light my cigar with, and said at the time that the box was a relic from Frisco and that he reckoned there wasn't another like it in Arizona."

"But, who got the box arter the strange cuss passed in his checks?" cried Hairpin.

A dead silence fell upon the crowd, and each and every man gazed with a strange look into his neighbor's face. The same suspicion was in the breast of all, and yet, rude and rough as they were, they hesitated to put it into words.

The old store-keeper was the first to speak.

"The gal got all the things I reckon, didn't she?" he queried.

"Yes, I reckon so," the landlord of the Grand Central Hotel remarked, prompt to follow suit now that suspicion was given speech. "In fact, I hate to say it—but it's the truth and ought to be said: I am willing to take my oath that I saw

that very match-box sitting on the table in the gal's room at my hotel this morning."

Keno Bill had not spoken as yet, but he had looked at the box and at the speakers in a strange manner while the finger of suspicion was being directed at the girl. The throng all looked upon him in the light of a leader and were anxious to know his opinion upon this weighty matter, and Captain Joe, guessing the sentiments of the crowd, put the question to him, plumply:

"See hyer, Bill, what do you think of this? Don't it kinder look as if the gal had had a finger in this mess?"

"No, no; why should she wish to do such a thing?" Bill cried, huskily. "It is impossible!"

"Nary time!" cried a big, brown-bearded fellow who stood near the captain, the same who had acted as foreman of the jury. "Some of these gals are reg'lar wild-cats. Who knows but what that cuss we hung to-day was innocent arter all and this gal might hev done the trick?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ACCUSATION.

THE burly ruffian in his blunt speech to a certain extent gave expression to the sentiments of the majority of the crowd. While his far-reaching suspicion that she had had something to do with the mysterious murder of the man in whose company she had come into the town, was a little beyond them, yet they did think that she knew something regarding the origin of the fire.

"See hyer!" continued the big fellow, encouraged by Bill's silence, and perceiving that he had the crowd with him, "this thing has got to be looked into, and right smart too. Why, fellow-citizens, think of the heap of property that would hev been destroyed if this hyer fire hadn't been put out; it would hev ruined the hull b'iling of us!"

Like many another blatherskite orator the big loafer wasn't worth a ten-dollar gold piece.

"That's so! that's so!" the bystanders murmured.

The captain, like all other popular men, was anxious to swim with the tide; so, when he perceived the set of public sentiment, he joined in the cry.

"Fellow-citizens, it is my opinion that we ought to have an examination, anyway!" he declared. "These things being found hyer looks mighty suspicious, and no mistake! and it won't do any harm to anybody to have the matter looked into. If the gal don't know anything about it she is innocent of course, and that will end the matter as far as she is concerned."

"That is as true as gospel!" the hotel-keeper assented, and two or three more joined in expressing the same sentiment.

Keno Bill, if he had dared, would have denounced the suspicion as being ridiculous so fascinated had he been by the marvelous beauty of the girl, and so strong his desire to make himself the master of the peerless beauty, but he was shrewd enough to see that the monster whom he had been active in coiling up to destroy the man he hated, was not satisfied with the prey it had already secured but hungered for more. He had roused the demon but he did not dare to attempt to stay its onward career.

"Well, Bill, will you take hold and run this 'ere machine?" the brown-bearded miner inquired.

"Not by a jugful!" the other replied, decidedly. "I think the idea is all nonsense, and I reckon, as I have suffered more than any one else, what I say ought to amount to something."

"Oh, you're kinder sweet on the gal, Bill, I reckon," the big fellow retorted, coarsely. "But I'm jest going to spit out what I think, and that is, we hev got too many she-devils in this town now for the good on it, and if this handsome critter is another one on 'em, and thar is good proof that she did this durned mischief, we hev either got to clear her out or else she will make this camp too hot for some on us!"

Many in the crowd assented to this; the ruffian had about expressed the general sentiment. Alcibiades, though, despite his self-control and the caution which he had resolved to practice, flamed out in anger:

"That gal is innocent!" he cried; "I know that she is innocent, and I will stand up for her to the last. What reason had she to go and blow up my house? What had she to gain by such an operation? Besides, she ain't like some of the tiger-cats in this town; she's a lady, she is!"

"I move for an examination, lady or no lady!" retorted the big fellow, arrogantly.

"So do I!" the captain added, and then the rest took up the shout with hardly a single exception, and Keno Bill in sullen rage saw that if he opposed the proceeding further he would be as one man standing against about all the town.

"You see, Bill, the boys are all ag'in' you," the bully remarked. "All we want is to git at the truth of the thing, you know, and you had better come along so as to be satisfied that the gal gits a fair show for her money. I nominate

the cap'n hyer to boss this job jest as he did the last one."

The store-keeper signified that he was "agreeable," and the rest applauded the selection.

"You are all making a cussed lot of fools of yourselves," Alcibiades growled. "I reckon I kin see as far into a mill-stone as the next man, and it's all foolishness this suspicion ag'in' the gal."

"Well, Bill, a leetle examination won't do ary bit of harm, you know; and if so be as how the gal is innocent you can jest bet your bottom dollar thar won't be ary man more glad than I; but the thing has got to be looked into, for I tell you a-finding of these things does look mighty queer, to say the least."

"Oh, go ahead; put her through and then you will be satisfied!" Bill retorted, savagely. "But I hope you ain't going to let all this crowd rush in upon the gal and scare the wits out of her."

"Of course not! What do you take me for?" cried the store-keeper, with a great deal of dignity. "I reckon we air a civilized community hyer, and we kin do a matter of this sort up as brown as ary town west of the Big Muddy. I take it that it is the sense of this gathering for a committee to be 'p'inted to wait upon the gal and ask her if she will be so kind as to explain 'bout these articles of hern found hyer."

"That's the idee, exactly!" declared Hairpin. "An' you're the man, cap'n, to run that air committee; an' seeing as how I was 'p'inted sheriff I s'pose I ought to be on it, too."

"And as foreman of jury, I reckon I ought to be counted in," the burly fellow added.

"Seems to me as I was the first one to discover the articles in the ruins I ought by rights to be on the committee," Charley Yampas remarked.

"Well, as you are all nominating yourselves, I reckon I ought to shove myself in and not be bashful about it, and with four of us on the committee that ought to be enough to put the thing through unless you want to throw it open to the hull town," and Alcibiades cast a lowering glance around; he was not well pleased with the way things were going.

"Oh, yes, four of us will be quite enough, and it won't do to alarm the gal, for though appearances are a leetle ag'in' her, yet she may not have had anything to do with the matter after all; so, gen'lemen, we'll go right up to the hotel and see what we kin diskiver, and you boys kin hang around on the outside; we will come down and report as soon as possible."

The captain hurriedly mapped out this course of action, for he saw that there were many in the crowd who did not like being left out in the cold. But by his quickness all debate was cut off, and the forward movement toward the hotel at once commenced.

When the Grand Central was reached, the captain, as the head of the committee, requested the landlord to conduct them to the lady's room. The delegation entered, and the crowd, who, to a man, had followed, remained without.

Miss Romero was seated by the table in the center of the room when the landlord entered, and she appeared surprised when he informed her that some gentlemen desired to have a few minutes' conversation with her if it was perfectly agreeable. The woman's quick instinct took alarm at once, for she understood that it was the hand of iron beneath the velvet glove.

But she concealed her fear in the most perfect manner, and, with a pleasant smile, said that she would be pleased to receive the gentlemen at any time.

The landlord then ushered the committee into the room, and, after they had entered, took up a position by the door, so that he could both hear and see all that transpired.

The captain, on his way to the hotel, had thought over his plan of action, and had arranged it very shrewdly.

"I trust that you will pardon us for intruding upon you, but we are after an important clew. Mr. Wentworth had a leetle box of wax matches, I believe?"

There was a strange light in the girl's eyes, and she hesitated a moment before she replied.

"He had," she said, at last.

"Have you got them?"

"No."

"Well, I s'pose you know what became of them?"

"I really do not."

Just then a bright idea came into the captain's head. The valise of the dead man stood in the corner; in it something of value might be found. He asked the girl's permission to look at it. She consented in the most indifferent manner. Carefully the old storekeeper examined the contents, and at length, suddenly, a loud cry burst from his lips.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MORE EVIDENCE.

ALL understood that he had made some important discovery.

And important, indeed, it was in the judgment of the old store-keeper. He had opened the valise and had carefully removed the articles in it, one by one; the valise was not a large

one, and contained only a few pieces of clothing, such as a man would naturally carry on a journey, but, as the captain passed his hand down close to the side of the valise, he felt that there was some small, hard substance concealed within the lining, and, upon examining into this matter, he found that the lining had been torn away from the frame and then carefully sewed up again. He ripped the stitches apart, and possessed himself of a small package carefully wrapped up in a piece of dark cloth. To untie the string which secured it, and to unroll the wrapper was but the work of a moment, and then, to his astonishment, he beheld one of the peculiar little daggers, two of which had already appeared in the town of Needle Bar; this, the third one, was an exact counterpart of the other two—a slender blade about six inches long, and a very little thicker than a tent needle, set in a handle of polished gold, a toy fit only, apparently, to adorn a woman's hair, and yet the citizens of Needle Bar could amply testify that it was capable of doing fearful work.

Entwined around the handle of the dagger was a piece of ribbon exactly like the one which had been discovered by Yampas's sharp eyes amid the ruins of Alcibiades's saloon, but, on the blade of the little dagger, and on the surface of the crumpled ribbon, were dark spots which to the eyes of the captain seemed like drops of human blood.

It was this discovery which had caused the exclamation to burst from the old man's lips.

Slowly he rose to his feet, and turning, exhibited what he had found to the gaze of the rest.

"Gen'lemen, I reckon that I have struck a lead hyer, for sure," he said, solemnly.

Every eye was turned upon the girl as the store-keeper exhibited the "plunder," but, not the least trace of excitement was apparent upon her face;—only a curious look, such as all the rest wore upon their features.

"Another leetle knife, by thunder!" the burly jury foreman, Caleb Johnson, blurted out.

"And do ye see this hyer bit of ribbon?" the captain asked, holding up the crumpled and stained piece of finery.

Quick as a flash went the hand of the girl to the neck of her dress where she was accustomed to wear in a dainty bow a similar piece of silk, but now the knot of ribbon was missing, and from the expression upon her face it was plain it was the first time she had discovered her loss.

All within the room noticed the action and the captain saw fit to speak in regard to the movement.

"Pears to me, miss, you used to wear a ribbon something like this."

"I'll sw'ar that she did!" Johnson exclaimed. "I seed it on you yesterday, miss, if I ain't mistaken."

"I wore it this morning, but I have evidently lost it for it is not in its place now," the girl replied, with the most innocent air possible. "But, that ribbon is not mine although it seems to be almost exactly like it."

"And you don't know nothin' 'bout it, nor 'bout this hyer leetle knife, either?" the captain asked, in a judicial-like tone.

"I do not, and I had no idea that it was in the valise, although I examined it and every article in it carefully after the death of my protector."

Then it suddenly occurred to the judge that, as he had conducted his search in the valise with his back to all the rest in the room, thus concealing his actions, no one knew of the mysterious mode in which the articles had been hidden away. He explained, then, how he had discovered them within the lining.

"That is the reason why they escaped my search," the girl observed.

"Then you don't know nothin' about them at all?" the captain repeated, the idea strong in his mind that the girl herself had concealed the dagger and the ribbon in the hiding-place and that she not only knew something of the origin of the fire but also was a party to the mysterious murder!

"No, sir, I do not."

"It is not your ribbon?" Charley Yampas remarked.

"It is not."

"Is this?" And as he spoke Yampas exhibited the ribbon which he had taken from Keno Bill's hand for the purpose of examination after it had been found amid the ruins.

"Yes, that is mine," the girl replied, instantly.

"I s'pose you know whar this hyer thing was found?" Johnson said.

"No; how should I?"

"It was in the ruins of this gen'leman's shebang," and he pointed to Alcibiades. "It were found arter the shebang had been blowed up by somebody and a fire started that might hev burnt down the hull town."

"The fire is out then, and there isn't any more danger?" and from the tone and manner of the girl she evidently was thankful that such was the fact.

"Yes; no thanks, though, to the party wot started the fire. I s'pose that you hain't got

the least idee who it was that blowed up the shanty?"

"How should I know?" the girl answered, immediately, an expression of amazement upon her face.

As the lady apparently had no idea of owning up if she was guilty, the old captain resolved to let her understand how strongly the finger of suspicion pointed toward her.

He drew from his pocket the little box of wax matches, which, together with the ribbon, had been found amid the ruins.

"Thar has been some mighty big foul play in this town to-day," he began. "The house of this hyer gen'leman has been blowed into smithereens; and whoever did it took advantage of the fact that 'bout all the town was out on the prairie, attendin' the hanging, so that no one saw how the thing was worked, as the town was almost deserted, but smart as was the trick the party as did it left two articles behind that I reckon will serve as a clew for us to diskiver who did the job."

Despite her efforts to retain her composure a shade passed over the girl's face, which not one in the room failed to notice.

"Mebbe you kin guess what those two things were?" the captain added.

"I should be dull-witted indeed if I did not comprehend what you mean," Miss Romero answered, with calm resolution. "The two articles to which you refer are my ribbon and that box of wax matches."

"Both found in the ruins of this gentleman's place, remember!"

"And from that fact, together with this cross-examination, I presume you suspect me."

"Not only that, gal," cried Johnson, "but more'n one in this hyer town thinks you are the one who killed the man t'other night in the street, and the finding of that leetle knife right hyer in your room won't be apt to make 'em change their minds, either."

An expression of anguish appeared upon the girl's face as she listened to this brutal avowal.

"Oh, no, it cannot be possible that any one can suspect me of so foul a crime!" she cried, rising to her feet in excitement.

"I regret to say, miss, that you are suspected, and we shall be obliged to hold you a prisoner until you can be tried. Not suspected so much of the murder, for we have already hung one man for that, so the account ought to be squared, but of blowing up the saloon, and I am sorry to say that the evidence seems to be dead ag'in' you."

"I am content to place my fate in your hands," the girl replied, in a tone of resignation.

CHAPTER XXX.

YAMPAS IS CURIOUS.

THE committee had retired to one of the lower rooms of the hotel to deliberate. Even Alcibiades had to admit that circumstances were against the accused, but held out stubbornly that she was not guilty.

"Such a trick isn't in a woman's way," he argued. "What reason had the gal to blow up my saloon? What had I ever done to her? Nothing at all; on the contrary, I was as big a friend as she had in the town, and I reckon, as the gal isn't any fool, that she must have seen right from the jump that I was ready to back her with every dollar I had, and if she wanted money she wouldn't have wanted any while I was in the burg. No, sir, thar's no sense in it!"

"But do you suspect anybody, Bill?" the captain asked.

"No, I don't," he answered. "I have trod on some folks' toes and have had mine trodden on, too, but I can't think now of any man who would have a grudge ag'in' me strong enough to excite him to put up such a job as this hyer one."

"There was a motive for it, of course," Charley Yampas observed. "Did you keep money on the premises?"

"Do you keep valuable plunder lying around loose in your saloon?" Keno Bill asked, bluntly.

"No, I do not; I'm no fool."

"Neither am I; thar wasn't any color of dust 'bout the place, and then, too, the explosion took place in the rear shanty and not in the main part at all, but if anybody had broke in, thinking to make a raise, is it likely they would go to raise a row so as to call the attention of the hull town to the job?"

"I tell you what it is, gen'lemen, and I am open to bet any man in the town a thousand dollars even up that I am right!" cried Johnson, "this hyer is all a durned plot and thar's a big gang at the back of it, and the feller that we hung to-day and the gal up-stairs are all in it. The gal run foul of the man that was killed and jes' led him on hyer so that he could be salivated. I reckon that both of 'em had a hand in it. The man held him, mebbe, while the gal stuck. Wa-al, when we got the man dead to rights and strung him up, the gal, to git hunk with us, tried to destroy the town, for if we hadn't come piling back and put out the fire the town would have gone, sure as shooting. The thing, gen'lemen—and I tell yer I know w'ot I'm a-talking 'bout—is jes' as plain to me as the

nose on a man's face. Thar's a gang in it! The man we hung was the boss and this gal is one of the head-devils too."

"More likely a tool," Charley Yampas suggested. "Women are not generally ringleaders. It may be true that there is a gang, and if so we had better be on the look-out, for most certainly they will try to get square with us for punishing their pals. Wouldn't it be a good idea for some one to try and frighten this girl into a confession? She knows that we have hung that man, and if she thinks she is likely to be put to death fear may induce her to tell all she knows."

The idea seemed to take, and all expressed their approbation with the exception of Keno Bill; he was disgusted with the way in which things were going.

After a little discussion it was settled that Charley Yampas, having originated the idea, should be intrusted with the carrying out of the suggestion.

The half-breed had a wily, plausible way with him, and the townsmen conjectured that he would be able to achieve success if such a thing was possible.

Her room was on the second story of the hotel. Two windows in the apartment looked out upon the open lot at the side. The hotel not being high-storied, it would not have been a difficult feat, even for a woman, to drop from her windows to the ground.

After his interview, therefore, with Miss Romero, the careful captain placed a sentinel without in addition to the man in the entry keeping watch upon the door of the apartment.

And the captain impressed upon the half-breed the necessity of "piling on the agony, strong," he must "skeer the gal," he must represent the town to be in a ferment of excitement—that the citizens entertained no doubt of her guilt, and that the prospects were she would not be given any trial, but be hanged at once.

Yampas declaring that he would play it for all that it was worth, departed on his errand.

The girl was seated by the center-table, in exactly the same position which she had occupied when the committee had first surprised her with their unceremonious call.

The half-breed apologized for his intrusion, craved her permission to be seated, and explained that he came as a friend.

Miss Romero surveyed her caller with interest, he was so different from the usual run of men whom she had encountered in this wild region. And the question which had puzzled a great many wise heads flashed at once upon her: was this peculiar-looking personage really a man or only a masculine-looking woman disguised in male attire?

On his part Yampas gazed into her face with a look which no one in Needle Bar had ever seen upon his features before; and the captive was astonished by it.

With a sudden start like unto one waking from a deep and solemn reverie, he proceeded to execute his task, but his failure was complete; either the girl was not to be frightened or else she was innocent of any guilty knowledge; then the questioner questioned the girl in regard to her early life and how she had come to be under the protection of the man known as Jason Wentworth, but whose right name was Martin Kenyon.

Although surprised that the half-breed should take any interest in the subject, she willingly related her simple story.

"Reared in a convent, eh?" the half-breed murmured, thoughtfully.

"Yes, sir."

"Then Kenyon's son, who, if he lives, would be about the same age as yourself, was not educated with you?"

"Kenyon's son!" the girl exclaimed, in amazement. "I never knew he had one."

"You never knew a son—never heard him speak of one, even if you did not come together? Try and remember! You must have heard him spoken of!" Yampas declared, strangely excited.

"No; I am sure he had no son, for many a time he has told me that he would give almost anything he had to give if I had been a boy instead of a girl."

"It must have died—died in its infancy, far from its natural protector who would have shed the heart's blood freely to protect it from harm and him; but, he is dead, and so let him rest, if such a man as he was can rest anywhere," muttered the half-breed, much to the amazement of the girl, and then rising to his feet, his face gloomy with thought, he begged the girl to pardon him for having troubled her, and withdrew.

It was a strange incident, and the captive maid knew not what to make of it.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A STRANGE AFFAIR.

The citizens were disappointed with the report Yampas was obliged to make, for they had confidently hoped the girl could be scared into a confession, but with natural pigheadedness, concluded that she was "chock-full of grit" and would not confess, out of sheer obstinacy; that her declaration was true—that she was innocent of all knowledge of the crimes of which she was

accused, never for a moment entered their heads. In their opinion the evidence was too strong to admit of any doubt of her guilt.

Alcibiades alone had protested, but his words fell upon dull ears. All he was able to accomplish was to delay matters. At first the citizens were for trying her off-hand; but a suggestion from Bill, who was determined to save the girl if possible, operated to delay matters.

He advised that the trial should not be hurried. The girl was safe, and if she had any confederates the chances were great that when they learned she was a prisoner they would attempt to rescue her, and then some other members of the gang could be secured.

So this idea was adopted, and the conference broke up.

Alcibiades proceeded to take measures to repair damages. The citizens had fought the flames so gallantly that only the rear part of the building had been destroyed, and the saloon part was very little damaged.

With his characteristic energy the Keno King engaged a gang of men to clear away the rubbish and then to rebuild the shanty, and while Alcibiades stood by watching the work the Doctor sauntered up.

"Well, did you plant him?" Bill asked.

"Oh, yes, sir; fixed him in first-class style."

"I s'pose you went through him?" Bill regretfully remembered the wealth which the sharp had so easily wrested from him at the poker-table.

"Why, what do you take me for?" cried the Doctor, with a grin. "No, sir, I'd scorn to do such a thing," he continued, loftily; "besides, what would be the use? I reckon the fellow didn't have much, anyway."

Alcibiades knew that the medicine man lied; his condition was plain proof of that. He evidently had got money from somebody, and it took *wealth* to get the medical sharp in a "happy" state. As he had often been heard to sadly remark, "an occasional spree" would not do for him; it spoilt the looks of a ten-dollar piece to get him full.

On the present occasion the Doctor was full—as full about as Bill had ever seen him; so it was plain to Keno Bill that he had got money from somebody.

"He had four or five hundred dollars in his pocket," Alcibiades remarked. "He won over two hundred from me at poker the night before."

"Well, well, if I had only known that!" the Doctor exclaimed, pretending to be amazed.

"Hiko got the money, I suppose then, for he would be sure to go through his pockets before he planted him if you didn't."

"Hiko didn't plant him; he ran off to see what the trouble was in the town with all the rest of you."

"Who did bury him, then?"

"Your humble servant to command."

"I didn't think that was in your line."

"Well, I didn't know how long it would be before any one would come to attend to it, and as the man was dead I thought the quicker he was got rid of the better, so I just threw the body into the river."

"Into the river!" exclaimed Alcibiades, astonished.

"Yes, and by this time, as the river is pretty high and the current is moving swiftly, he is probably twenty miles away on his road to the Gulf of California."

A grim smile came over the face of Alcibiades; he understood why the bum had set the body afloat. It was to cover up the fact that he had possessed himself of the dead man's valuables.

The doctor, as if to shut off further talk about the matter, passed on, and Alcibiades, a weight removed from his mind that his foe was finally out of the world, gave his attention to the work before him.

Night came; Keno Bill had not completed his repairs; so his ranch was not opened, and those who generally frequented it were forced to go elsewhere. Members of the "committee" dropped in to have a chat with Bill about affairs—the last being Captain Joe Kersands. He and Alcibiades had a hot argument and parted, as most contestants do, each with a firm conviction that he was clearly in the right and that the other was an extremely blind and obstinate man not to admit it.

It was about eleven when the captain departed and after a few minutes' further rumination the troubled Alcibiades thought a stroll before he retired to rest would compose his nerves; so he went forth into the open air, but had not got out of the shadow of the building when he stumbled over the prostrate form of a man extended at full length.

Recovering his footing he was able to make out that the body was that of the old store-keeper!

Alcibiades's first thought was that he had fallen in a fit, and so kneeling by his side he essayed to undo the collar of the flannel shirt, but upon inspection found the shirt to be already open at the neck. As he made this discovery Captain Joe began to revive.

"What's the matter?" asked Bill, assisting the old fellow to rise to a sitting position.

"Oh, help me into your place," the captain responded, rising with Bill's aid to his feet, but still very weak.

Alcibiades assisted the store-keeper into the saloon, and the captain sunk into a chair. From the expression upon his face it was clear that he was laboring under some strong emotion.

"Give me a glass of whisky for Heaven's sake!" he gasped.

Bill supplied the fluid, which the other gulped down at a single draught.

"What was the matter with you, old man?" the saloon-keeper demanded.

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Ghosts!" Alcibiades was amazed at the question.

"Yes, ghosts—spirits, you know."

"No, I do not."

"I have seen one to-night—felt one, too! Isn't there a red ring around my neck?"

And sure enough there was!

"The ghost I saw was the spirit of that man we hanged to-day, you know—California John!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

MORE AND MORE MYSTERIOUS.

ALCIBIADES stared at this announcement, while the captain, with a trembling hand, proceeded to help himself to another drink of whisky.

"It's an awful thing, I tell you, Bill," the old man continued, after he had gulped down the liquor—something rare for him, for he seldom drank anything. "I never was so upset in my life."

"Well, that is pretty near correct, I guess, seeing how I found you."

"It was jest awful. I am an old man, Bill, and though I say it, I reckon I have seen as much of life as any man of my years. I have heard a heap sight 'bout ghosts, spirits and that sort of thing, and I will say right out that I never took any stock in the stories."

"No more do I; when I see a ghost I will own up beat, but not before," remarked the other, incredulously.

"Same way with me, Bill—same way, sure as you are born; but, seeing is believing, ain't it?"

"Not always," Alcibiades responded; "I have known a man to see rats and snakes and all kind of things when thar wasn't nary hide nor hair of the critters within a mile."

"Oh, yes, I understand all about that, but, as I am a living, breathing man I swear to you that I saw to-night the ghost of that poor devil we hung to-day."

The store-keeper's manner was seriously solemn, but Bill was not convinced.

"Well, Cap, I reckon he must have found it uncomfortable in the other world or else he wouldn't have come back so soon."

"Don't joke, Bill!" exclaimed the old fellow, protestingly. "I tell you what, it ain't any joking matter. I got a turn to-night worse than I ever had afore."

"Tell me all about it," suggested Alcibiades.

"There ain't much to tell, for the hull thing didn't take hardly a minute. After I got through talking hyer with you, I started for home, as you know, but right arter I closed the door after me and stepped down off the stoop, somebody grabbed me from behind; mebbe I had walked ten or fifteen steps and had got to the corner of the building. I was griped right around the neck with a clutch that was as hard and as cold as iron. I wriggled round to show fight, for I thought of course that it was some footpad who had been laying in wait to make a stake out of somebody, and as I did so, by the aid of the light coming from your window, I caught sight of a face looking over my shoulder, and that face was the face of the man we hanged to-day. I never got such a shock since I was born, and I reckon I have got nerves like iron, but the grit went clean out of me the moment I caught sight of that horrible, white face. Why, the very blood in my veins seemed to stand still; I got as weak as a cat! It flashed on me immediately that the man was innocent and his ghost had come back to haunt the town. Since we have found out these things about the girl I have been dreadfully afraid that we were a leetle hasty in regard to the hanging; it really doesn't seem now as if he was guilty."

"Cap, I don't doubt that you are perfectly honest about this matter," Alcibiades remarked, "but I reckon your imagination has been too much for you. You were right 'bout some fellow, hungry for a stake, goin' for you, and perhaps he might have looked something like the man we hanged, and that is all thar is 'bout it. Look and see if he hain't gone through you."

"Oh, nary time!" the store-keeper responded, confidently, but when he shoved his hand into his pocket a most decided change came over his face.

"Well, you ain't got so much wealth as you had, eh?" and Keno Bill smiled.

"Curse me! if you ain't right!" the old captain blurted out.

"Your money is gone?"

"Every bit of it!" Then the captain thought of his revolver, which was quite a costly weapon. The holster belted to his side, under his

coat, was empty! The revolver had gone to keep company with the buckskin money-bag.

Alciades laughed heartily now.

"I tell you, Cap, it was a lucky thing that I happened to come out as I did and frightened the fellow off, or else he would have stripped you clean to your shirt."

The captain rose slowly to his feet, a bewildered look upon his face.

"Bill, I saw the ghost of that man to-night, and thar ain't no mistake about it, and as spirits don't have any use for cash or weapons, it is as plain as a pike-staff that it wasn't the ghost that went through me. The durned thing laid me out stiff when I caught sight of it, and then some galoot came along and corraled my plunder, and I reckon the quicker I git on the trail of the skunk the better." Then the old man passed out into the night, leaving Alciades to his own company.

But, this was not the only odd event of that night. As the reader will remember the brawny foreman of the jury had managed to make himself very conspicuous at the time of the lynoh trial, and by his brawling had set himself up as one of the principal men of the town; consequently on this particular night he had been flourishing in the rôle of a hero in the saloons. He had the revolvers of the hanged man and had been exhibiting them with as much pride as though, single-handed, he had captured the owner and thus had wrested the trophies from him.

About half-past twelve o'clock, just about an hour after the time when the ghost of California John had appeared to the old store-keeper, if his story was to be credited, Johnson, being "chockfull, up to the neck," with fire-water, as he expressed it, concluded to go home for the night.

His shanty, which he occupied alone, was up on the river's bank, about a quarter of a mile from the town.

By the time he started on his homeward journey the moon had come up and afforded plenty of light. Making his way home without any particular difficulty, he unlocked the padlock which fastened the shanty door and entered.

A candle stood upon a dry goods box in the center of the one room. Johnson struck a match and lit this candle; then he commenced to disrobe for the night. He unbuckled the belt that supported his own revolver, and into which he had thrust the two handsome weapons the California sharp had surrendered. He placed upon the box the belt and the revolvers, and paused for a moment to gloat over the superb "irons."

Suddenly he felt a current of air upon his back, as though the door had blown open. He turned, and the sight that met his eyes fairly made the bristly hairs upon his head rise in horror.

There in the door—framed as it were in the moonlight—stood the Californian, his face pale and the lurid line which the rope had made still visible around his neck.

A howl of terror came from the lips of the burly ruffian, and as the specter form stepped forward, with a single bound he plunged, headforemost, through the little window in the side of the building, carrying sash, glass and all with him, and then fled at headlong speed toward the town.

No snake in the boots, now, but a real ghost!

CHAPTER XXXIII. IN MORTAL PERIL.

THE citizens of Needle Bar were terribly excited; enough thrilling events had been crowded into the last few days to suffice for a year.

The story of the Californian's ghost traveled fast, thanks to the captain and to big Caleb Johnson, and although the "yarn" was not generally believed, many gave the tale a respectful hearing.

"The captain had a fit and Johnson was drunk!" This was the easy solution.

Then, too, what use had a ghost for cash and firearms?—for the "spirit" had not only relieved the old store-keeper of his cash and revolver, but had also appropriated the capital tools which Johnson had taken to himself.

But public interest in the ghost story was eclipsed by the excitement of the trial of the girl.

Though to some of the more cool-headed and fair-minded citizens it seemed a dreadful thing to put such a young and beautiful creature in mortal peril, yet the majority of the towns-men, satisfied that she had had a hand in the blowing up of Alciades's shanty, were anxious that "justice" should be done.

It is not worth while to detail the farce, for such it was, of the so called "trial." Alciades was the only man who attempted to raise his voice to defend her, but he was not strong enough to stem the tide of public opinion, and so the prisoner was convicted and condemned to be hanged in one week's time.

Then she was conveyed back to her quarters in the hotel and a strong guard placed over her.

But no sooner had the citizens time to consider and debate about the affair, than the really revolting nature of the doom pronounced upon the culprit became plain to them.

A heated discussion in regard to the girl had been going on in the keno saloon, and the captain, who as Judge Lynch had sentenced the girl, had become quite angry. Ever since his encounter with the ghost his conscience had smote him. He believed that the Californian had been innocent—the girl being the real criminal, and he felt as if the blood of the sharp was upon his soul.

"I tell you what it is, gentlemen!" he exclaimed, excitedly, "that gal is the critter what did the mischief; she stuck the man and she tried to destroy the town, and the quicker sich a tiger-cat is put whar she can't do any mischief the better!"

"It will be a big thing for the town!" Keno Bill remarked, sarcastically. "I reckon the news will travel far and wide, and, mebbe, bring a heap of pilgrims in to settle with us. Needle Bar will be about the first town west of the Mississippi that I ever heerd tell on what could boast of having hanged a beautiful young woman in cold blood."

Somehow this speech sounded terribly brutal even to the men who had been most eager in sentencing the girl. They looked at each other.

To hang such a woman was not a reputable proceeding in any town.

"But she's guilty and ought to be hanged!" the captain protested.

"Guilty or not guilty, is it going to do the town any good to hang her?" Bill asked.

Many in the throng shook their heads dubiously. Clearly it would not do the camp of Needle Bar any good without regard to the innocence or guilt of the accused.

"Why, the very name of the town will be a byword all along the hull line of the frontier," Bill continued, in scorn. "When a cuss speaks of Needle Bar, some other pilgrim will say, 'Yes, that's the burg where they hang young women!' I tell you what it is, gentlemen, you are running the machine, and of course you kin do as you like, but if you put this thing through I reckon that any man with cash in his hand kin buy what leetle interest I have in this hyer town dirt-cheap. Why, boys, can't you see that sich a thing is going to burst the town, sure as shootin'?"

"Gents, I reckon the best thing to do would be to let the gal slide," the little Doctor now put in. "Give her five hours to git up and git with a warning that, if she is ever found within the limits of the town again she will be hanged without judge or jury. Suspend sentence, in fact, on condition that she goes away and never troubles Needle Bar with her presence again."

"Why, that would be like offering a premium for having our town burnt up and our throats cut!" the store-keeper exclaimed, in disgust. "If the sentiment of the town is against the hanging because she is a woman, then at any rate she ought to be punished in some way."

"Whether guilty or innocent, eh?" Alciades asked.

"She has been pronounced guilty by twelve good men after a fair trial," and that is enough for me," the Judge replied. "But, Bill, to speak right out plain, the pretty face of the girl don't sway me a bit. The handsomer the gal the more dangerous she is when she makes up her mind for evil. My idea about the matter is that this gal is in with a hull gang who have lighted down on us with the intention of going through the town, and if we let her get off scot-free don't it stand to reason that it will encourage the rest, and if we don't hang her I think that we ought to keep her as a sort of decoy duck, so as to lure the rest of the gang on. If the citizens are opposed to hanging her on account of giving the town a bad name, why then I think we ought to imprison her. Then, of course, her pals will attempt to rescue her and the chances, gentlemen, are big that we will be able to capture them one by one, if we are careful to keep a close watch."

This measure was, apparently, the best that could be adopted. Even Alciades had no fault to find with it, although he observed:

"I reckon it's ten to one ag'in' your catching any of the gang, for I don't believe thar is any sich thing."

At this stage of the game a bright thought occurred to Johnson, who made one of the party.

"Say, Judge," interposed the astute Johnson, "why not try on her the game that wouldn't work with the sharp? She thinks that she is going to be strung up; let some one go offer to let her off if she will make a clean breast of it and tell who put her up to this job. It is big odds now that she will weaken and give the hull thing away."

This idea was received with great favor, and Alciades was unanimously chosen to make the visit.

"Mind! if she tells who put her up to it, she kin go free!" the Judge instructed.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

KENO BILL'S OFFER.

DESPITE the lateness of the hour Alciades went to the door of the girl's room and asked if he might be permitted the favor of a few words with her.

The maiden assented, and passing the guards,

Bill entered the room, closing the door carefully behind him, as if determined there should be no witnesses to the interview.

Explaining to Miss Romero that he had come on a mission he took a chair and came at once to the business in hand.

"Miss, to come right down to the bed-rock, I s'pose you understand you are in a terrible fix hyer," he began.

The face of the girl betrayed very little signs of emotion as she replied:

"Yes, as far as human judgment can determine, I am indeed in a position of great danger."

"Well, miss, the men who are running this machine have been talking the matter over, and they have come to the conclusion that, seeing as how you are a woman they will give you a chance for your life, although, miss, to tell you the honest truth, the people in the town are terribly prejudiced ag'in' you, and they are howling to have you hanged as soon as possible."

A slight shudder shook the maid's form at the word "hanged," but she was possessed of undaunted courage, and except the involuntary motion she exhibited no trace of fear.

"In the great hand of Heaven I am," she replied. "If it is the will of a wise and just Providence that I should die what can I do but submit with resignation to the decree?"

"I said that the leading men of the town have been talking the matter over and that they have come to the determination to give you another chance for your life. You see, miss, they are of the opinion that in this matter you have not been exactly a free agent but that you have been carrying out another's plans."

An amazed look swept rapidly over the girl's face, and Bill, watching her closely, at once inferred that there was somebody else in the background.

"They think, mebbe," he continued, "that you didn't know exactly what you were a-doing, and they are willing to give you a chance to get out of it; so if you will confess who put you up to it, and give us a chance to get hold of them they are willing to let you slide."

"You mean, betray my accomplices?"

"Exactly; let us know who they are, so that we kin get our clutches on them, and we are willing to call it squar'. We'll hang them instead of you. Come, what do you say, will you do it?"

The girl shook her head.

"You won't do it?"

"I cannot admit that I have any accomplice."

"Well, miss, I reckon you are true blue—clear grit, for sure!" Bill exclaimed, admiringly. "Take plenty of time to think over the matter now; don't be in a hurry, remember it is your life that is at stake."

"I fully understand the position, and if you should give me a year to consider, I should not be able to return you any other answer."

A peculiar look passed over the face of Alciades; then, drawing his chair still closer, and with a cautious look around, as if he feared eavesdroppers, he said:

"Miss, if that's anything in this world that I like it's pluck, and I don't think ary bit the worse of you for having grit enough to keep a still mouth. In fact, I have had a mighty good opinion of you ever since you struck this town, and, now that you have got into a tight place, I am real anxious to help you out."

The maiden looked steadfastly at the speaker.

"Oh, I mean it, honest Injun!" he declared. "It is a safe thing to bet on, sure as you are born. I am kinder sick of this hyer town, anyway," he continued, in a meditative manner, "and I had just as lief emigrate as not, and, to tell the truth, I am gitting rather tired of paddling my own canoe. I heerd a Gospel sharp preach once up in Frisco, out in the sand-lots, and, though I didn't take much stock in the most of his talk, yet he said two or three things that seemed to hit me whar I lived, and one on 'em was that it wasn't good for man to be alone. It struck me at the time that thar was a powerful deal of truth in that are saying, and that is why, I s'pose, that men are so apt to go pardners with each other; but, pards ain't in my line; I never had but two or three, and them and me didn't hitch well at all, arter a while. They were allers trying to get the best of me, or I was a-playing roots to get the deadwood on them; but the moment I set eyes on you the other day, I sed to myself—thar's the kind of pardner that would suit me."

The girl opened her large eyes widely in astonishment; this was the most novel love-making she had ever heard of, but that the man was thoroughly in earnest there wasn't any doubt.

"Now, miss, if you kin see your way clear, I kin," Bill continued, finding that the lady was not inclined to speak. "Jest say the word, and I will have you out of this town before you are a week older, and I don't care either how many guards they put around you. When the pines comes I can play as keen a game as any man that can be scared up in this region."

"You can rescue me from my present peril?"

"Yes, if you are willing to pay the price. I ain't much on love-making, you know, but you will find me square, every time. I am pretty well fixed for cash, and I am one of those men

who, when they get a tumble, land always on their feet, jest like a cat, you know. Of course I don't know exactly how the man that was strung up the other night put up for you, but this I kin say, I kin do jest as well by you. You are jest as handsome a woman as ever I laid eyes on, and you have got grit, too, and that suits me; but you want silks and satins, and finery and jewels to light you up, and that is what I kin give you. Jest you jine your fortunes with me, and I will give you my word that thar sha'n't be a better dressed woman west of the Mississippi."

The girl had listened to this proposal with a peculiar expression upon her face.

"I regret that I am unable to bring myself to accept your offer," she responded, "but it is so sudden, so unexpected—"

"Thar ain't much time for ceremony in this hyer case," Bill interposed. "What has to be done has got to be done mighty quick. It's life that I am offering you, miss, and I s'pose you understand, too, that I am risking my own in trying to make the rifle, for I tell you the boys would be mighty apt to make short work of me if they thought I was trying to play any gum-game on 'em."

"It cannot be, no matter what fate is in store for me," and Miss Romero spoke so decidedly that even bull-headed Bill knew further argument would be useless.

"Well, I am sorry, miss, that we can't arrange it, somehow," he remarked, rising to depart. "Of course I will do all I kin for you in a fair way, but, if you had taken my offer, I would have had you out of this by a trick afore you was a week older or I would have been a dead man."

Hardly had the words left his lips when there was a strange interruption to the scene.

The window, which looked out upon the rear of the hotel, was open at the bottom, though the curtain was down so that no one without could look into the apartment, and through this opening a small white parcel came flying into the room.

CHAPTER XXXV.

ON THE SCENT.

THE parcel fell directly at Alcibiades's feet, and he at once stooped and possessed himself of it, for he comprehended immediately that it was a communication intended for the captive.

As he had surmised, the parcel consisted of a sheet of note-paper wrapped carefully around a stone and tied with a string.

"You will really have to excuse me for looking into this hyer thing," he said, as he slipped the string from the stone, and unfolded the paper.

Bill was puzzled by this strange affair, and puzzled still more by the fact that the girl appeared to be as astonished as he was by the unexpected messenger, for, unless she was a most expert actress indeed, she was entirely taken by surprise. And then, too, she did not manifest the least objection to his proposed examination.

In amazement he read aloud:

"Do not despair; a friend is near, and aid will reach you when you least expect it. Keep up a stout heart for the ghost of California John is watching over you, and what can these weak mortals do when opposed to a spirit from the other world?"

There was no signature, nothing but these few words, and it would have been a difficult matter to have decided which was the most annoyed—the condemned girl, or the keen-witted, unscrupulous Keno Bill.

At first sight the letter seemed like a hoax, but who would want to play such a trick upon the girl? And then, too, how had it been possible for any one to have flung the missile through the window without being detected by the armed guards, a line of whom completely surrounded the house?

"I reckon that this hyer is a joke, miss," Bill observed, "and for the present I will keep it myself until I look into the matter a bit. California John was hanged, and I never knew hanged men to take much interest in the affairs of this hyer world arter the execution was over, so I wouldn't advise you to build much hope on what this scrap of paper says, but I will look into the affair right away, and if it is a joke I pity the man that put up the job if I get my hands on him."

Then Keno Bill withdrew from the room, leaving the captive to reflections which were far more pleasant than she would have cared to acknowledge, for to her there was more in the note than the mere words implied.

Alcibiades went down-stairs and briefly reported to the assembled citizens the unsatisfactory results of his interview, and then, when they fell into a hot discussion over the matter, he withdrew from the room, bent upon solving the riddle of the mysterious communication.

He walked around to the back of the house. Every one of the guards seemed to be keeping vigilant watch, and as the person who threw the stone in through the window must have approached quite close to the house, it was a mystery to Bill how it could have been done without attracting the attention of the guard.

Alcibiades determined to question the senti-

nel, and upon approaching him discovered that it was the Doctor.

"The durned cuss!" Bill muttered, the moment he made this discovery; "I don't take any more stock in that galoot than in a broken-winded mule. He'd be willing to sell his own grandmother for a five-dollar bill. I'll bet a hundred dollars to a cent that he's the man who chucked that stone into the window; but what is his little game, anyway? The gal didn't seem to understand the note any more than I did, and who in thunder is it cavorting around the town pretending to be the ghost of California John? I reckon thar is a mighty big rat in the meal-tub somehow if I kin only git holt on it."

The Doctor, who, with a pipe between his teeth, from which he was puffing great clouds of smoke, and a breech-loading rifle on his shoulder, was pacing up and down, apparently much more occupied in enjoying himself than in watching the prisoner, was for a moment startled when Alcibiades advanced upon him suddenly from the gloom. The light from the hotel windows illuminated the circumscribed beat of the guard so that the two thus abruptly brought face to face could easily distinguish each other's features.

"Say, what do you mean by this little game?" cried Alcibiades, angrily, scowling upon the Doctor.

But that gentleman had quickly recovered his composure; in fact the Doc was not easily disconcerted; it was a common saying in the town that the medicine sharp couldn't be abashed by anything short of a brick house falling on him.

"Why, I am on guard here, watching to see that the gal don't hop out of her window up there, you know," and the Doctor jerked his thumb significantly upward toward the illuminated window of the prisoner's apartment.

"Gammon! You know what I mean, well enough. You didn't reckon, I guess, that I was in the room up yonder when you chucked this stone with the letter wrapped around it into the window," and Bill produced the articles.

A slight shade passed over the Doctor's face, but he covered up his confusion—if confusion it was—very adroitly by a vacant sort of stare up at the curtained window and then down upon the articles in the hand of Alcibiades.

"You see you are caught, and the only thing for you to do is to make a clean breast of it!" Bill exclaimed, roughly.

"What on earth are you talking about, respected William?" the Doctor asked, a look of profound astonishment upon his round, fat face.

Alcibiades was terribly amazed at this pretended ignorance.

"Oh, you can't get out of it! I have got you foul this time. You wrote this hyer note to the gal and then flung it through the window, little thinking that I war thar and that it would fall into my clutches. I s'pose, by the same token, that you are the man who has been playing ghost all over the town and I reckon that you will get your neck stretched for that."

"Look a here, Bill, are you drunk or crazy?" the Doctor demanded, with a great deal of dignity. "What do you mean by charging such things upon me? What have I got to do with the girl? And, as for this note that you talk about, I reckon that it will be an easy matter to prove whether it is in my handwriting or not. And then the ghost business, if you can get over the fact that I can prove where I was when the ghost appeared, you are welcome to hang me; and I look a heap like the ghost that they describe, too, don't I? I am about five feet high and the Californian was five feet eight or ten! Oh, yes, I could easily play myself off on anybody for him!"

The Doctor's defense was so strong that Bill was puzzled. It was clear that even if he had written the note he could not possibly have played the ghost; both the captain and Johnson had said that they had distinctly recognized the features of the hanged man in the face of their assailant.

"Oh, you are cunning enough, but I will trip you up yet, smart as you think you are!" Bill blurted out, as he turned away in sullen rage, leaving the Doctor to continue his talk.

"I will have to poison that big brute," the Doctor remarked, as he watched the burly figure of the Keno King melt into the gloom. "I will have to do it the first chance I get."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A STRANGE ENCOUNTER.

THE westward-bound coach had been unusually late in leaving Needle Bar that day. The eastern coach with which it connected had not arrived until after dark, and, as it happened, had only brought a single passenger, an army paymaster, en route to Fort Yuma; he had been for two days shut up in the eastern stage, the roads being bad, and so had begged the driver of the western hack "for Heaven's sake!" to give him time to stretch his legs around town a bit. A five-dollar gold piece deftly insinuated into the horny palm of the veteran, Si Holcomb, about the oldest driver on the line, induced that worthy to pretend that his team needed new shoes, and he contrived to dilly-dally about this

operation for nearly four hours, so that the paymaster not only had an opportunity for rest but for relaxation as well, and this he got by going into Charley Yampas's place and attempting to cut the claws of the "tiger."

This was no easy task as others had proved, but the paymaster was a high-tone sport, if such a one had ever struck the town, and having plenty of money at his back he succeeded in doing what had never been done before—he broke the bank!

Five thousand was Yampas's limit, and the stranger got away with it, and the faro game in the Silver Hell shut up for repairs.

Just after this momentous event, one of the most astounding that had occurred in the history of the town, while the crowd were "hist-ing p'ison" at the paymaster's expense and envying him his good fortune, old Si came in with the intelligence that the coach was all ready for a start.

Gracefully then the stranger withdrew from his new-found friends, and with his plunder departed; more than one man in the crowd secretly wishing that he had pluck enough to turn road-agent, and relieve the visitor of the spoils which he had so easily won.

The driver, having some little fear that some such trick might be attempted, had taken the trouble to warn his passenger; it was something rare for the old man to interfere in anything not exactly in the line of his duties, but he had taken an interest in the passenger and had made up his mind to "put him through" all right if he could.

All went well until after midnight, and the moon was up full and clear; then, in passing over a rolling prairie, broken here and there with little clumps of timber, a horseman rode out suddenly from behind a small cluster of trees right into the trail.

He was well-mounted and well-armed, for two good-sized revolvers glistened in his hands.

The driver pulled up his steeds at once and came to a dead halt, for he understood that the presence of the unknown in the trail boded no good.

"Ware hawk!" he cried, "what do you want thar?"

This was done to warn the paymaster that there was danger ahead. The passenger was not asleep as Si had feared, and instantly grabbing his revolvers, thrust his head out of the window.

"Hallo, what's up?"

At the same moment the stage-driver recognized the beast upon which the stranger was mounted.

"Blow me tight!" he cried, "if it ain't Charley Yampas's mar!"

"The master of the Silver Hell has come after his leetle five thousand then," the paymaster remarked. "He is not satisfied 'to give it up so, Mr. Brown.' What he has lost through lack of skill and want of luck, he calculates to make up by force, but we will try to give him a Roland for his Oliver!"

"Be not alarmed, my gentle friend," quoth the horseman, in deep-toned accents, such as never had come from the lips of Yampas. "No mischief is intended although the moonbeams dance and play upon the shining steel of my weapons. They are displayed merely as a hint for you to halt your fiery steeds in their wild career. I only wish to inquire if you have on board of your hearse my esteemed friend, Paymaster McCook, of the United States Army."

The passenger stuck his head still further out of the window in order to see if he could recognize the speaker, but the voice was strange to him and the face was covered with a black mask.

"My name is McCook," the paymaster said, "but as far as I know I have never had the pleasure of your acquaintance. If you will take off your mask, though, I may be able to recognize you."

"You will really have to excuse me from complying with your very reasonable request; I have made a vow to keep my face covered until a certain time elapses," the horseman replied. "Besides, to see my face would not benefit you in the least, as, to the best of my knowledge, this is the first time we have ever met."

McCook began to be interested in this mysterious personage, so different from the ordinary road-agent, for this was not the first time that the paymaster had been waylaid in this wild Western land.

"To what may I ascribe the pleasure of this meeting then?" asked the passenger, determined not to be outdone in civility.

"My business is easily explained. Although I have never met you, yet your fame has reached my ears. I have been told that you are one of the best short-card players that ever struck the Pacific slope."

The paymaster bowed in acknowledgment of the compliment. In reality he did rather pride himself upon his skill at poker and kindred games.

"I too flip the papers once in a while for a consideration, more or less," the horseman continued, "and ever since I heard that you were in this part of the country I have just been

a-dying to find out how great a chief you are in this line. There are sundry weighty circumstances existing at present which prevent me from seeking you in the broad light of day amid the haunts of civilization; and so, rather than be denied the pleasure I crave, I have taken this rather unusual method of meeting you. Will you have the kindness to come out of the stage, leaving your weapons behind of course. I will dismount, tether my horse, also leaving my weapons behind, and we can sit down to a social game. My venerable friend, Si, can be the umpire, and I am, perfectly willing to be plugged instantly if I betray the least sign of treachery. The moon is bright and will afford plenty of light for our game. I have got a few hundred dollars in my pocket which say that at poker I cannot be beaten by any man who walks the earth, and if you think you can flax me you are welcome to the dust."

Now in the opinion of both listeners this was about the fairest possible offer and with a spirit characteristic of the true sport the paymaster accepted the banter.

Out from the hack came McCook; down from his horse dismounted the stranger; while the veteran driver proceeded to make himself comfortable upon the box, in eager anticipation of the heat which was in store.

At work then the two antagonists set. The paymaster lugged out his cash sachel, which included the five thousand he had wrested from Charley Yampas, and, confident of victory, played with liberal stakes, only soon to discover that good fortune was not always his.

The horseman won steadily and persistently, and ere two hours were over he was the master of all McCook's own money.

He rose to depart.

"It has been a fair game?" he said.

"Fair, but deuced unlucky for me; but I say, give me something to remember you by!"

"My name will do that. Tell the world that you had no show to win for you played cards with the ghost of California John!"

And swinging himself into his saddle he rode away.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

COMING TO AN UNDERSTANDING.

AGAIN our scene shifts to the lonely cabin by the bank of the muddy Colorado, wherein dwelt Hiko, the Hunchback, and the strange woman who had occasioned the inhabitants of Needle Bar so much wonder.

It was near the midnight hour, and in the little cabin, which was illuminated by a solitary candle burning upon the table, sat the mysterious woman and the Hunchback, busy in consultation.

Just forty-eight hours had elapsed since the strange meeting on the prairie had taken place, as related in our last chapter.

The coach had made its trip, returned, and the driver, with great gusto, had told the story of how the ghost of the hanged man had "skinned" the paymaster at the game of poker.

Needle Bar listened and wondered, and great was the talk that the affair occasioned.

And now the Hunchback and the woman were debating in regard to the matter.

"It is quite evident," remarked the Hunchback, "that the sport escaped death, although how the trick was accomplished is a mystery, for I distinctly saw him hanged with my own eyes."

"True enough, and so did I, but, you see, there is no doubt that he *did* escape, and what is more, he is hovering around the town bent on mischief."

"What is more natural than for him so to act! He is a bold, resolute and skillful man, with blood, not water, in his veins. He has been badly used, and is not likely to rest content until he can square the account."

"I must see him!" the woman exclaimed.

"No easy matter, I fear. A man whose life is forfeited, and who is obliged to appear in the character of a ghost, will not be likely to be very accessible to visitors."

"Where there is a will there is always a way. He will come to the town in time—"

"In disguise, you mean?"

"Yes, disguised, of course."

"How to know him, then?"

"Trust my eyes to detect him in any disguise that he may assume; I care not how complete it may be."

"We made an appointment with him once, but he failed to escape; perhaps he might go there now, thinking to meet his unknown friends," Hiko suggested. "As he is situated at present a few friends in Needle Bar would be of great assistance to him."

"The time of the appointment was midnight, was it not?" exclaimed the woman, abruptly, springing to her feet.

"It was."

"It is about twelve now, and I will ride thither and take the chances of meeting him."

"Do you wish me to accompany you?"

"No, I will go alone. I will return within an hour whether I succeed or fail."

Then the woman proceeded to the little stable in the rear of the cabin, mounted one of the

two horses which stood there, already saddled and bridled, and set out.

The moon shone bright as she rode on her lonely way over the desolate prairie, where no trace of either human, beast or bird was to be distinguished.

The little clump of cottonwood trees growing by the bank of the Colorado, to which reference has before been made in our tale, was only about a mile northward from Hiko's cabin, and therefore it did not take many minutes for the hardy little animal which bore the woman to cover the distance.

As she approached the trees her keen eyes distinguished, when quite a distance off, that there was a mounted man halted beneath the shadows.

"My thought was right, then," she murmured, when she made this discovery. "I felt sure I should find him."

The horseman did not seem to be conscious of her approach, although he sat facing her, for he did not move in the least. The woman noticed, though, that he was well prepared for war, a revolver glistening in his right hand.

"I am a friend," she said, as she rode up and halted by the horseman, taking a good look at him as she spoke.

And as she looked she was perplexed. In no single particular did this man resemble the Fresh of Frisco. He seemed a much larger man in build, not taller, but much more burly. The face of California John was smoothly shaven, with the exception of a neatly-trimmed mustache and imperial, while this man wore a heavy beard, and in complexion too the horseman seemed to be almost as dark as an Indian, but this might be partly due to the deep shadow cast by the trees; in the very center of the little clump he stood.

California John appeared to be every inch a gentleman, a cool, keen sharp, while the stranger had that unmistakable look about him which to the practiced eyes proclaimed the frontier desperado.

But in spite of all this the woman believed the horseman to be the man she sought.

"A friend! well, as to that I reckon that I am the friend of every petticoat from here to Kingdom Come," he replied, in a way that plainly indicated he was inclined to be jocose, and though lightly spoken the words, yet the man's voice was as rough and brawling as though a defiance to mortal combat had been given.

"You wait here for some one?"

"Mebbe yes, and mebbe no."

"I am the one for whom you wait."

"I ain't sure though that you are the one I want to see."

"Oh, I know you in spite of your disguise, and I am the one that aided you to escape—although you didn't manage to get off, but that was because luck was against you, and through no fault of mine—and I sent you the message bidding you meet me here."

"Well, perhaps I am the man and perhaps I ain't, but if you choose to take the risk of it, fire away, for I reckon you hav'n't taken this trouble for nothing."

"You are not acting in as good faith as I thought," the woman retorted, "for I do not fear to openly reveal to you who I am while you disguise your identity."

"I ain't so sure 'bout that," the other replied, instantly. "Perhaps you ain't playing a part and then ag'in mebbe you are. I never saw you afore, not rigged out as you are now, although mebbe I would be willing to bet a trifle that I have seen you in another character altogether."

"You are sharper sighted than I gave you credit for being," the woman observed, a curious expression upon her face. "But it matters not. If you have penetrated my disguise, well and good; we shall understand each other the quicker; and now to business. No doubt you thought it wonderful that strangers should interfere in your behalf, but there was a purpose in view; a man like yourself was needed. I wanted to buy you, and I judged that life was about the best thing that I could offer."

"Life is a mighty good thing, but as the rifle wasn't made I am not sure that I ought to consider the sale a go. But what am I wanted for, anyway?"

"There's a leap of money to be made by my partner in Needle Bar when Keno Bill is run out of it," the woman remarked.

"I am really afraid that we can't trade; but how about the girl whom Keno Bill and the rest are hunting down—can she be saved?"

"I want no rival near my throne!" exclaimed the woman, her lip curling.

"I knew we couldn't trade; you would want to boss the shop, and we should quarrel instant. I have made up my mind to save the girl in spite of all the men in yonder town."

"You don't count the women then?" and the woman gathered up the reins of her beast, preparatory to departing as she spoke.

"You are in the opposite camp then?"

"Since you are not for me, I must be against you."

"I hate to fight women, but to help this girl I would face a fiend fresh from the fires below!"

With a scornful smile the woman rode away.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

TAKEN IN AND DONE FOR.

OUR esteemed friend, the Doc, had been on pins and needles lately, to use the common saying. Ever since the time when the parcel had been thrown into the captive's window Keno Bill had kept a most suspicious eye upon the movements of the medical man; for Alcibiades did not in the least credit the Doctor's declaration that he knew nothing whatever about the matter.

It was too thin! Keno Bill had declared in the most emphatic manner, and he had warned the Doctor that if he caught him trying any gum-games his life would not be worth a moment's purchase, and as Rice knew the Keno King to be a man of his word it wasn't any wonder that he was considerably affected by the threat, for the Doctor was not noted for his courage.

Keno Bill had been greatly excited over the matter, for it proved clearly enough that the captive maiden was not without friends in the town, and that those friends would endeavor to aid her to escape from the dreadful doom impending without saying; Bill, with a great oath had sworn, since she had rejected his offer, that no one else should save her. If she would not pay his price then she must die.

But so odd and peculiar was the man—so eager that all attempts to aid the girl should be frustrated by his hand alone that he never said a word to any one implicating the Doctor in the parcel affair, although he told his fellow-citizens that certain facts had come to his knowledge which made him sure that the girl had accomplices near at hand who would make a desperate effort to assist her to escape the death to which she had been doomed; and in proof of this he produced the letter which he said he had intercepted on its way to the prisoner, but he did not mention the Doctor's name in connection.

Rice was ignorant of this though, and being troubled with a guilty conscience, he imagined that every one in the town regarded him with suspicion. Every time that any one happened to look at him the Doc at once came to the conclusion that the gazer meditated mischief and so he had kept himself secluded as much as possible from public gaze; he had seen quite enough of his fellow-citizens of Needle Bar to know that they were fully capable of stringing him up in short order if they got the idea into their heads that he was playing any "roots" upon them, to use the vernacular of that region.

Heartily the Doctor cursed the young woman, the ill-fated hour in which she entered the town and his own inordinate greed in being tempted to mix himself up with the matter in any way whatsoever.

And while Rice sat in the darkness in the solitude of his cabin meditating over the unpleasant position in which he found himself there came a rap at the door.

The Doctor being desirous of keeping as secluded as possible had refrained from lighting a candle, so that any one passing by seeing no light within would be apt to imagine that the owner was absent.

But this visitor was evidently determined to get in, light or no light, for he thundered with his fist upon the door with all vengeance.

"Git up and let me in, you blamed old jack-ass of a doctor!" the stranger without cried in hoarse tones not familiar to the ears of Rice. "I reckon that I am p'isoned and I've got to have a Nanny-goat or a Billy-goat, or whatever kind of a goat you call it! Git up! or I'll kick the hull front of the shanty in!" And then, as if to give due force to the threat, the man threw himself against the door with a force which threatened to burst in the entire concern.

Now the door was not a very strong one and from the way the man was going on it was apparent that if admittance was not granted him, and right speedily, too, he would force his way in, so in order to save his property the Doctor began to parley with the man.

"Hello! what do you want?"

"I'm p'isoned, I tell ye! got hold of some whisky so bad that it has turned me inside out, and I want you to gi'n me somethin' to take. I'll give you five dollars if you'll cure this darned old green apple belly-ache which is a-jest taking the liver out'n me!"

The offer at once dispersed the Doctor's fear. Five dollars did not hang on every bush, and, as there was evidently no danger to be feared, Rice hastened to admit the applicant.

"Come in, and I'll have a light in a moment," he said, as he opened the door. "Don't be afraid. I will give you some stuff that will fix you all right in the wag of a mule's tail."

Then he went to the table, struck a match and lit the candle, while the new-comer closed the door and paced his back against it.

The candle lighted, Rice turned, and the sight that met his eyes almost congealed his blood with horror.

The stranger barred the portal his with person, and in his hand a cocked revolver gleamed. The Doctor realized instantly that he was in a trap, a foe had stolen a march upon him. He knew that the man was an enemy, although at

the first glance he perceived that he was a stranger, both to him and to the town.

He was a huge, tawny-bearded, lion-like man, with long, tangled locks floating from under the rim of his well-worn slouch hat upon his shoulders.

But at the second glance the Doctor fancied that the man was not so much of a stranger as he had at first supposed.

"Don't attempt to give any alarm, or I shall be obliged to let daylight right through you," said the intruder, perceiving that the Doctor was by far too astonished to speak. "You will have to excuse the unceremonious nature of this visit, for the business upon which I come is urgent, and there isn't time to spare to stand upon the rules of society. You received a certain parcel to deliver to a certain lady, and for which service you were well paid in advance; you betrayed your trust, and delivered the note, not to Miss Romero, but to Keno Bill!"

"As Heaven is my Judge, I did not!"

"Oh, yes, you did; Bill has the note all right, and of course now knows that there are plans on foot to aid the girl to escape. If the job was not an agreeable one to you, you should have refused to do it; it was but a paltry act to betray the thing to Alcibiades."

"Listen while I tell you how it all happened, and you are welcome to kill me on the instant if I speak aught but the truth!" Rice exclaimed, greedily agitated. "Of course, when the parcel reached my hands, and I understood what was expected of me, I had an idea who was at the bottom of the affair—I suspected that the message was from you, and I was perfectly willing to do all that lay in my power to help the girl, provided that I didn't endanger myself," and Rice proceeded to explain how it had happened that the package thrown in at the window, instead of reaching the hands of the imprisoned maiden, was captured by Keno Bill.

The stranger listened with the utmost attention, and, when Rice had finished, he nodded his head.

"I reckon that you are giving it to me straight," he remarked.

"Oh, honor bright!"

"Well, now, you are a cunning fellow, with a good head on your shoulders; you have been smart enough to trick the town once, but I've got five—thousand—dollars in my pocket which says you can't do it again—it says you can't fool these bloodhounds and save that poor innocent girl from the fearful doom so fast approaching."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

MORE LIGHT.

At the same hour that the mysterious stranger was dazzling the mind of the Doctor with the scheme to aid in the escape of the girl, two more people were conversing upon the same subject. In the lonely cabin of the Hunchback sat Hiko and the strange woman who had so puzzled the busybodies of the camp.

"Will they proceed to extremities?" the woman asked. "Will these strong men dare to hang that tender, feeble child?"

The Hunchback shook his head.

"I hardly think they will—that is, if everything proceeds in due course, but if a tumult should arise, there is no telling what would happen."

"Do you think there is any danger of that?"

"I have suspected for the last two or three days that there has been some underhand influence at work operating against the girl, and from the way things have been going on have concluded that Keno Bill has a finger in the pie."

"I do not understand how that can be—are you quite sure of it? From the way he has acted ever since the girl was accused I got the idea that he would do all in his power to save her."

"Yes, he did seem to be struck after her; it was the talk of the town; yet for all that I am as certain as a man can be about any trick which is worked in the dark, that Keno Bill is doing all he can to get the girl hanged."

"But the motive? why should he thus change front?"

"Mebbe he tried to make a bargain with the girl and she wouldn't have it. Such things have been, you know. A rejected suitor generally turns into a bitter enemy."

The remark caused the woman to wince.

"Now you are hitting at me!" she exclaimed. "You have guessed that I failed when I tried to entrap my bird the other night."

"Well, I will confess the thought was in my mind. You did not make me your confidant, but knowing you so well I had an idea of what was in the wind, and if you had asked my advice you would have saved yourself the trouble of the journey and the mortification of the refusal."

"You felt sure, then, that he would not accept?"

"Yes, morally certain; there is another image in his mind, and until that is effaced no other woman will stand any chance."

"You mean the girl who is condemned to die?"

"Yes, but she will not die if the power of mortal man can save her, and this one is moving heaven and earth to raise money, and money will do a good deal out in such a country as this. Why, he made a small fortune when he went through the paymaster, the other night. But I say, how do you stand in regard to the girl? As well as I know you, that is a question which puzzles me."

"And it is one that I can hardly answer," replied the woman. "I will frankly confess that, when my offer was rejected, and at the same time I was informed by him that he had determined to save the girl, I made up my mind to do all in my power to prevent him from attaining success—in fact, I told him, pointedly, that all who were not for me were against me."

"And what answer did he make?"

"Oh, he laughed in his cool way, and said that he should try to make the rifle, anyhow."

"And no doubt he will try, if all the world stands in his way!" exclaimed Hiko.

"I had fully made up my mind to do all I could to interfere, but I can only do that by taking part against the girl, and there has sprung up a feeling in my heart which will not allow me so to act. I have been thinking deeply over the past to-night, reflecting upon the terrible deed which wrecked all my young life, and at last I begin to think I have a clew to the dark mystery which shrouds the past."

"A clew!" cried the Hunchback, evidently greatly interested.

"Yes, I have about come to the conclusion that all the time I have been barking up the wrong tree."

"I do not understand you."

"I hardly understand it myself," the woman replied, with a mournful smile.

"You have discovered something new, then?"

"No, nothing at all."

The Hunchback looked surprised.

"Perhaps it is but a woman's whim with no more reason at its base than there is foundation to the rushing wind. You know my sad story—how in early girlhood I was led from my home and friends through the fiend-like arts of this man who here met his doom only a few nights ago, and even when I discovered what an utter devil he was, yet with all the trusting faith of woman I clung to him and followed him in his devious wanderings up and down this great Pacific coast; I shared his fortunes whether they were good or bad, and during all those dreadful years he walked far more often in the shadow than in the sunshine. But, at last, there came a time when fortune smiled upon him, and then growing tired of the woman who had given up all for him, he deserted me for a newer beauty—a bold, bad woman fit only to bend men's hearts to murder. He deserted me, alone and friendless, in a strange place, with hardly a dollar in my pocket, and on the eve of motherhood, too."

"My wrongs made me mad; I followed on his track, thirsting for his blood; I had but one thought—vengeance on the man who had ruined my life, no matter what the cost."

"I found him in company with the siren for whom he had forsaken me, and my arm was as steady as a rock when my finger pulled the trigger which sent the ball crashing into his flesh. He dropped down in his tracks, mortally wounded as all believed. I was arrested, but when the tale of my life was learned they bade me go free. But my destroyer did not die. The wound was but a trifle, and he barely suffered a week from it. He panted, though, for revenge, and the method he took was well suited to his cruel nature. He caused a watch to be placed upon me, having discovered the refuge to which I had betaken myself, and then, when my baby was born, he bribed the wretch of a doctor who attended me to steal it; then he sent me word that the vengeance he had planned was one which would make me curse the hour when I had dared to cross his path. He intended to rear my child to a life of crime, and never until his last hour came when he stood upon the scaffold to pay with his guilty life the forfeit due his crimes, should I know him or he me."

"But he died without making sign."

"It was all a trick to deceive and torture me. The child was not a boy, although he paid the old woman who attended me to say it was. That child—my child—is this poor girl whom the bloodthirsty demons of this town are bounding to her death!"

"What proof have you of this?"

"None at all, except the instinct natural to the heart of a mother! I have tried to hate this girl but I find I cannot; there is something in my heart which urges me to her—something which bids me do all in my power to save her, and I shall obey the impulse."

"There may be something in it. Nature is a wonderful mistress and her works sometimes baffle all human skill."

"You will aid me?"

"Have I not always been ready to do your will, ever since the time when you saved my life when I lay helpless with the fever?" Hiko asked.

"Forgive me that I wounded you, even by a doubt. Let us at once set our wits to work, for, despite of Keno Bill and all the ruffian crew who follow his lead, this poor girl must be saved."

Heaven had raised up two powerful friends for the helpless one in her hour of trial.

CHAPTER XL.

THE STERNEST FOE OF ALL.

SIX days had elapsed since the girl's trial.

There had been a growing opinion that she would not be hanged after all.

"Nary woman will be hanged in this town; it would bu'st Needle Bar all to smash!" so Hairpin and his adherents contended.

Keno Bill and his friends, though, were doing all they could to oppose this opinion, and from words the two factions promised fair to soon come to blows, so angry was the contention.

But on the evening of the sixth day a new face was put upon matters by the girl abruptly complaining of illness.

It was just after she had eaten her supper. She had only drank a cup of tea and taken a slice of toast, leaving the rest of her supper untouched, and when the servant came to take away the articles she found the girl lying upon the bed, evidently in pain.

Word was immediately sent to "Judge Lynch," and, as it happened, Alcibiades, the old store-keeper and the Doctor all met at the door of the hotel—all having heard the report.

"You are jest the man we want to see, I reckon," the captain remarked, as he encountered the man of medicine.

The Doctor was very much under the influence of liquor, and Keno Bill glared at him with suspicious eyes, for the moment he had been informed of the girl's illness, he had decided that the Doctor had had something to do with the matter, and was disappointed when he found that the bumper had not been in the building for some time, but, for all that, it did not shake his suspicion.

The three entered the house and proceeded to the girl's apartment.

The captive was evidently very sick, and responded in a low tone to the physician's questions. Little information could she give. She had been well all the afternoon, had eaten her supper with as much relish as usual, and then had been immediately taken ill; a faintness came over her, accompanied by violent pains in the stomach.

"Aha! it must have been something in the food then!" Bill exclaimed.

Lynch was quick to deny this, for he felt that it threw suspicion upon him.

"It couldn't be!" he cried, warmly. "All she ate was a bit of toast."

"And what did she drink?"

"A cup of tea."

"Exactly, and that was what did the mischief; the tea was drugged!"

"Look hyer, Bill, I don't like you to say a thing like that!" Lynch protested.

"I think you are too quick, William, in this hyer matter," the captain remarked.

"Oh, both of you are too dull! I don't mean to say that Lynch had anything to do with it. I know he wouldn't have any object to do such a thing—"

"But who would?" Kersands asked.

This was a poser, for Bill had only vague suspicions to go upon, and for the life of him he couldn't have explained why any one should drug the girl, as there seemed to be no motive for the deed.

"The easiest way to get at the truth is to examine the tea," the Doctor suggested.

"It's down-stairs, what there is left of it," Lynch hastened to say; "but, gentlemen, I am morally certain that thar ain't anything wrong 'bout the tea for a dozen had it for supper. I had two cups myself, and the Doctor had a cup, and thar ain't any soul sick."

"Oh, you were hyer to supper, then?" cried Keno Bill, addressing the Doctor.

"Yes, I was here to supper and what of it!" demanded Rice, defiantly. "Are you trying to get it into your wool that I poisoned the girl?"

"You are none too good for it!" retorted Alcibiades, glaring at the other. "I reckon that a ten-dollar bill would buy any life that you could get at, and I'm betting my pile on it, too!"

"And who paid me the ten dollars, eh? Come, since you are so smart, perhaps you will be able to answer that question?" The Doctor was showing fight much to the astonishment of the rest. "The lady has been through a great deal of trouble lately and her nerves have probably been affected by the constant strain. Nothing serious. All she requires is a soothing mixture and then she will pull through all right. Don't be alarmed, my dear; you will feel different in the morning." And then the Doctor withdrew, followed by the rest.

In the entry Rice spoke:

"Gentlemen, I didn't want to speak before the girl, for I don't believe in giving useless pain, but in my judgment she will be a dead woman before midnight."

The hearers stared at each other; they were not prepared for any such disclosure.

"Ain't you rather hasty in this opinion?" the captain asked.

"It's my judgment, gentlemen, that is all, and six hours will tell you whether I know my business or not. I will give her a little soothing draught, but it's no good; that girl is dying and all the doctors and drugs in this world can't save her."

The doctor prepared his mixture and administered it to the patient, and in a very short time it threw her into a sleep.

"She is sleeping," Rice said, when he rejoined the rest below.

"And when will she be apt to awake?" Lynch asked.

"Never in this world. You can send for me at midnight, for about then she will pass away."

CHAPTER XLII.

PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT.

FOR all the Doctor spoke so firmly the rest were incredulous.

The girl was ill, there wasn't any doubt about that, but to their eyes there were no signs visible that death was so near, and therefore they doubted.

The matter gave rise to a great deal of talk, and, after the fashion of the region, to a deal of betting. To the mind of the average Westerner there is no better way for a man to back his opinions than to put his money up. Some believed that everything would be exactly as the Doctor said, but the greater part of the crowd, headed by Keno Bill, were not slow in declaring that the Doctor was a drunken fool, and, if he had ever known anything, liquor long ago had driven the knowledge out of his brain and soaked up what little sense he had originally possessed.

Twelve o'clock then was anxiously awaited, and when the hour arrived Keno Bill, accompanied by the store-keeper and Lynch, proceeded to the girl's apartment.

They entered with cautious steps. Lynch's daughter, Ellen, had volunteered to sit up and watch with the sufferer. She was an intelligent, bright-faced girl of sixteen, and reported that Miss Romero had only stirred once since she had been in the room, and that was just a moment ago; she had been lying on her side and had turned with a slight moan over on her back.

With cautious steps they all approached the bedside, and as they looked down upon the quiet face the same thought occurred to each and every one.

The girl was dead!

With staring eyes they looked first upon the wax-like face and then upon each other, but before any one of them could speak the door opened and the Doctor entered.

"I didn't wait for you to send for me, gentlemen," he remarked, as he advanced to the bedside. "Didn't I tell you she would die about midnight?"

"It is death then?" Keno Bill asked, in a dogged, stubborn sort of way as if he felt disposed to dispute the fact to the last.

"Examine if you doubt the evidence of your eyes."

Alcibiades was a doubter, but when he lifted the cold hand, noticed that the pulse had stopped beating, that the color had retreated from the lips, he began to believe that the Doctor was right; a sterner foe than even the men of Needle Bar had proved to the girl, had intervened and snatched their prey away.

"Oh, thar ain't the least bit of doubt about it, Bill," Lynch remarked, in a sorrowful way, as Alcibiades replaced the cold hand upon the coverlet and stepped back a pace. "The gal is gone, and I tell you I feel a heap sorry that I was ever mixed up in the blasted business at all."

"So do I—so do I," repeated Captain Kersands.

Keno Bill did not join in the cry, but stood with a moody face, his eyes bent on the mortal remains of the woman whom he had pursued so closely, while Miss Lynch commenced to sob.

"Maybe you doubt that the girl is dead now?" the Doctor remarked, addressing Alcibiades.

"I doubt everything and everybody," that individual replied, sullenly.

"Let me convince you then by the best test in the world, or at least it is so considered," and Rice took from its nail the small mirror which hung on the wall, and with his arm rubbed the surface of the glass carefully. "Now hold this to the face so that the mouth will be close to the glass. If there is life in the body moisture from the lips will dim the shining surface."

Keno Bill nodded as if he understood all about such things, then took the mirror and tried the test while the rest anxiously looked on.

The mirror sustained the Doctor's declaration. Not the slightest moisture appeared upon its surface.

"Oh, she's dead, sure enough!" the captain declared, as Alcibiades held up the mirror for examination.

"Well, thar is one good thing about it—the town is spared the disgrace of hanging her, and I tell you it would have been mighty rough on the town as a town."

The next day the Grand Central was an especial object of attraction, for every one within twenty miles of The Bar came in, when they heard the news of the death, to get a look at the remains.

The Doctor advised an early burial, because when any one died of a mysterious and unknown disease, the quicker the body was put under ground the better, so as to avoid the risk of contagion.

This seemed like sound sense, and the greater part of the citizens approved, but Keno Bill, and the faction which always followed in his lead, right or wrong, declared that there wasn't any need of haste in the matter.

Alcibiades had got it into his head that something was wrong about the affair, and was equally certain that the Doctor was mixed up in it; therefore, all the Doctor had to do was to open his mouth and express an opinion to have Keno Bill immediately take the opposite side.

One thing helped Bill's side, and that was that the girl's appearance did not change in the least; three days after the time of her death, her face looked as natural as ever, and any one gazing upon her would be far more apt to believe she was sleeping, rather than dead.

For six days Keno Bill fought the funeral off, but at last the citizens began to believe that the Doctor knew what he was talking about, and that the girl was dead, for certain.

As to her remarkable preservation, the Doctor accounted for that easily enough. It was the climate, he said. The air was so pure and dry that the body was drying up, turning into a mummy, in fact, instead of decaying.

And so, finding public sentiment beginning to run very strongly against him, Bill thought it wise to give in.

On the sixth day after her death the funeral took place.

The graveyard that Needle Bar boasted was not a very elaborate affair, and it was situated by the river, about half a mile below the town, close by a little grove of cottonwoods.

It was the greatest turnout that the town had ever seen. The Doctor had volunteered a coffin, and had contrived to patch up quite a decent looking one; Hairpin donated the use of his mule team for a hearse, and old Captain Kersands said a brief prayer at the grave, which was dug by the Hunchback, under the Doctor's direction.

It was sundown before the affair was over and the assemblage returned to the town, and it was not until after midnight that the lights were out and the talk stilled that the funeral had caused.

But, at one in the morning, amid the rude tombstones that marked the humble resting-places of Needle Bar's dead, under the bright beams of the moon, two dark figures stood.

The fresh earth at their feet marked the spot where the girl had been buried.

Spades were in their hands, and revolvers belted to their hips.

They thought that only the silver moon watched them, and recked not that in the clump of cottonwoods four more dark figures crouched.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A BATTLE ROYAL.

"Now, then, a few minutes' work, and the job is done," said one of the men in the graveyard, thrusting his spade into the soft earth, and, as he spoke, the voice revealed that it was Rice, the Doctor.

"But, are you sure that your plan will work? It seems to me that there is a terrible amount of risk in it," said the other, who was the big-bearded stranger who had made such an unceremonious call upon the Doctor.

"Oh, don't you be alarmed about that. It is not the first time I have worked the trick," the Doctor answered, in the most confident manner.

"Then it is not an experiment?"

"No, bless you! I wouldn't have dared try it if it had been. But I have worked the oracle in this way three different times. I tried it on myself first. I was in a hole, and I had to choose between death and this operation, and of course I risked it, and the best proof that I succeeded, is the fact that I am here to-night to tell you about it. She will be none the worse for this little proceeding in a couple of days."

"Well, I hope for your sake, old man, as well as for my own, that it is as you say, for if the operation is a failure I shall feel mightily inclined to lay you out," the other remarked, and he tapped the butt of one of his revolvers in a very significant manner.

"I am willing to take the chances, but let us get to work. It won't be the first time, by long odds, I tell you, that I have wielded a spade at the midnight hour in a graveyard; it recalls my old college days."

And without more words the two set to work. Within fifteen minutes they had unearthed the coffin, and, after considerable exertion, succeeded in raising it to the surface of the earth.

"You see I was careful to provide a flexible rubber tube so as to conduct air to her, or otherwise she would have smothered. It was in order to have everything all right that I volunteered to find the coffin."

While the Doctor was speaking, the other had knelt down and opened the lid, exposing the figure of the girl, who looked as life-like as if she had only dropped to sleep a moment before.

"She's all right," remarked the Doctor, stooping over the coffin and making a careful examination; then he took from his pocket a small vial containing a dark-colored liquid, and, uncorking it, by the aid of a quill, poured a few drops into the girl's mouth, between the firm-set teeth.

"There! that is about as potent stuff as there is in this world," he observed. "Under ordinary circumstances, a dose such as I have just administered would be quite sufficient to sap the life of the strongest man, for it is a most active poison, but in this case it restores life instead of destroying it. The suspended heart action is quickened; it will take it about an hour to work, and at the end of that time you shall see what you shall see."

"We must away, then, at once, for time is precious!" and he stood over the coffin as if about to lift out the lovely, though senseless inmate.

"Hold hard, there! Stop where you are, and throw up your hands, or we will drill holes right through you!" cried a hoarse voice from amid the cottonwood timber, and out into the moonlight stepped Keno Bill and burly Caleb Johnson.

Cocked revolvers glistened in their hands, and fierce determination shone upon their faces.

"Treed, by blazes!" muttered the Doctor, a scared look coming over his face.

But his companion stood up and boldly confronted the new-comers.

"Oho, and you're the man that has been playing ghost round this town, eh?" Bill continued. "I had a suspicion when I first heard of the thing that you had contrived in some way to save your neck, and I s'posed this blamed Doctor aided you. I'd had a bone to pick with you, Mister Doc, for some time, and now I reckon we will have a settlement."

Rice groaned aloud in agony of spirit, but his companion on the contrary was coolly waiting for some chance to get at his weapon, without exposing himself to the chance of certain death.

"Shall I plug him, Bill?" asked Johnson, who covered the Doctor's companion with a deadly aim.

"Oh, no; don't kill him for the world, there's a good stout rope a-waiting for him in Needle Bar, and I reckon I will make it my business to see thar ain't any tomfoolery about it. You will be hanged for good, this time, and I reckon you will stay hanged, too, or I'll know the reason why. And as for you, Doctor, you needn't howl; you have no cause to be afeard; I'd like to kill you off-hand, I own, for I think you are a p'isoned little snake, but if I did that, mebber I wouldn't be able to fetch the gal out of this hyer fix you have got her into, and so I can't afford to indulge in the luxury just now. But you, California John, I will fix you, sure as you're born."

"You are quite right; I am California John," and he removed the wig and false beard which had so completely disguised him. His motive in this was to throw Keno Bill off his guard, and thus be able to get a chance to draw his pistol, but Alcibiades was not to be caught.

"Be careful whar you put your hands," he cautioned. "I want to see you hanged, but I am not going to take any chances on it, and if you try to pull your pistols I will plug you just whar you stand, and have you hung afterward, though thar ain't half the fun in hanging a dead man that there is in stringing up a living one."

"You don't dare to give me a show for my life, you big coward!" taunted John.

"Well, I am not going to give it to you whether I dare or not," Bill retorted. "Throw all the words you want to, now. It will be my time when I get you with the rope around your neck. Go ahead, Johnson, and wind a lariat round him."

The burly ruffian advanced, but at his first step the adventurer plucked forth his pistol and jumped quickly to one side, but Bill was on the alert, and instantly discharged his weapon. But he was not the only one on the watch, for just as he pulled trigger a dark figure which had bounded forth from the trees struck him in the back with a small knife, and the revolver-bullet whistled harmlessly through the air. At the same instant another dark figure in the timber clump fired at Johnson. The burly ruffian gasped, clutched wildly at the air and then sunk down writhing in death.

Meantime, although mortally wounded, Keno Bill had wheeled around and closed with his unknown assailant. Together they struggled with desperate energy, and then went down in a heap, Alcibiades crushing his smaller antagonist beneath him as he fell.

CHAPTER XLIII.

LIGHT AT LAST.

"Do not fear!" said the killer of Johnson, stepping forth from the shadow of the trees; "we are friends."

Both John and the Doctor recognized the speaker; it was Hiko, the Hunchback.

Then all hastened to where the two combatants, who had grappled with such fury, lay motionless.

As they came up to them the Californian noticed something glisten, sticking in Keno's back. He was lying face downward, his antagonist beneath him, held with a vise-like gripe.

John stooped, and from the back of Alcibiades drew a little golden dagger, an exact counterpart of the weapon by which Jason Wentworth met his death!

With a bitter curse the Hunchback rolled the body of Alcibiades off the antagonist who had dealt the fatal blow, and there in the moonlight lay the lifeless form of Charley Yampas. In the struggle Keno Bill had managed to get out his knife, and a single desperate slash had let out the life of his assailant.

The grief of the Hunchback was profound. He dropped upon his knees by the side of the body and covered the lifeless face with kisses, and then wildly called upon the Doctor for his aid.

Rice proceeded to examine the wound, and great was his astonishment when he opened the shirt of the half-breed to discover that it was a woman!

The face and hands were stained, as a disguise, for the bosom was as white as the driven snow.

Doubtless long ere this the reader has penetrated the mystery—that Charley Yampas and the woman who dwelt in the cabin of the Hunchback were one and the same.

And the finding of the little dagger, too, by the Fresh, in the body of Keno Bill, opened his eyes in regard to the mysterious murder of Jason Wentworth. Not possessing a knowledge of the woman's history, he of course had no idea of the fearful wrongs which she had suffered—of the ruined life and the cruel treachery which had partially unsexed her and driven her forth a wanderer upon the world.

As Keno Bill had suspected, although he had not a particle of evidence to hang suspicion upon, there had been a deep-laid plot in regard to the girl.

The Doctor had made a bargain with California John to rescue the young woman. In attempting thus to save her, the Californian was but giving service for service, for it was she who arranged his rescue from the rope. His remark, during his interview with her, about the Doctor's proposition to save him, she had treasured up, and after leaving John she had sought the bummer physician and bargained with him to save the condemned.

The Doctor arranged the matter easily enough; he had so fixed the knot in the rope that it could not slip beyond a certain point, and had also so arranged a smaller rope that it passed around the prisoner's body, just under the arms and then up and connected with the other one; all the strain was brought upon this; the huge black cap, which he had provided, concealed the whole arrangement.

The rifle-shot was also a signal for the girl, in the town, to set fire to the train which led to the mine fixed by the Doctor under Keno Bill's premises. The object of this explosion was to draw everybody back to the town, so that he, the Doctor, could release the prisoner.

In the second instance, in regard to the saving of the girl, the wily Doctor devised equally as cunning a plan.

He had carelessly walked through the kitchen just as the cook got the tea ready to send upstairs to the captive, and, watching his opportunity, had dropped a powder into it which made the girl ill immediately after she had taken it. Then, when he had been called upon to prescribe, he had administered a subtle drug which had the power of throwing the patient into a comatose condition which would have puzzled the ablest doctor in the world to distinguish from death.

Keno Bill was the only one who suspected that all was not right, and so he came to watch the grave. The woman "Charley" noticed his stealthy departure from the town, and so in turn watched him.

The grief of the Hunchback was intense when he found that the woman who had so greatly befriended him was dead. To the Californian he confided the story of her life, and of her belief that the girl who had been reared by the villain, whom she had slain, was his own daughter, but as both wronger and victim had gone to their last home, it was plain that the mystery would never be surely solved, although, in Hiko's mind, there wasn't any doubt but that the mother's heart had guessed rightly.

A few more words and our tale is told.

The Doctor's scheme succeeded to a charm, and the girl came back to consciousness, none the worse for the strange adventure through which she had passed.

And, together, the Fresh of Frisco and his love, for she had owned that he was all in all to her, journeyed onward, leaving far behind them the town of Needle Bar; but, though the Camp never saw the man again, yet the bold deeds of California John are the theme of talk through all that wild region.

THE END.

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